YOUENN

U.N.C.'s

21 LITTLE STORIES

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Life has its way and we have ours.

Living is just trying to reconcile with both of them.

I dedicate my book to my close friends and dear family

who helped me in the writing

either by correcting parts of it,

or by inspiring parts of it.

Live Right Through It

Being different means a lot of things. Being very different means even more. It means being at a crossroad where routes, which some people don't even know they exist, meet.

I never complain about it but I have a tough and unlikely background. It is so unlikely that people laugh and say « No way! » while rolling their eyes at me as I explain it. Today, I accept my particularities; there were times in my life when I couldn't say so.

I can't write that I had a sad or bad childhood, because that's not true and it wouldn't be fair to my family. I would say that I had a weird childhood though. I used to live in two worlds apart. I used to live in a world where I was powerful, in which I could overcome obstacles just by

willing so. In that world, my difference made me peculiar. At the same time, I sometimes lived in a world where looks were knives that people would throw at me. In that world, my difference made me disabled. That last world was in fact reality.

As time went by, those two universes collapsed and merged to finally become my adulthood. I had then to handle my future; my parents could no longer hide anything from my eyes. Despite how much I wanted to cling onto my fantasies, I had to grow up. Which I did and maybe too fast: I tasted bitterness too early. And like a poison, particles of bitterness entered my body and had made themselves at home in my veins.

When it comes to living, only two choices are possible. You can either leave your mind in the fantasy world and live a fake happily ever after; or, you can grab Life by the balls to show everyone you have some too and live a genuine happily sometimes after. I picked the second option.

Today, I am a junior consultant in IT with a good salary and I intend to build myself a career. If I can be proud of my situation, it was not obvious at all back then. Back when I almost believed what people's eyes conveyed down to me.

When I was a child, I spent my Wednesdays at home with my mum. We often took a tour in the neighborhood to shop or simply put some air in our lungs, as she liked to say. We occasionally ran into acquaintances and had a chat. My mum got along with everyone. Plus, she had six children to talk about so she needed a lot of time. When

it came to me, she exaggerated everything. Perhaps it was unconscious. I considered that it was an early form of increasing public awareness concerning the disabled. No matter what she would say, I could see that her listeners didn't buy it.

By the way, I don't know what upsets me most: being treated like trash or being told great compliments which people feel obliged to magnify conspicuously. I've learned to recognize them; their talking makes no sense. It's supposed to be nice but the words have nothing to do with anything, nothing to do with me.

I went to regular schools. I took every class and every exam I could and passed successfully. I graduated from high school after spending fifteen years fifteen miles away, because, in my town, preschool teachers minded switching floors for me to access their classes. And I graduated from my engineering 5-year cycle in a school only partly equipped with lifts.

Almost any disabled person who would have been proposed that deal would have passed on the chance. Maybe I was foolish to accept facing stairs situations. Maybe I was unconscious of the risks I was signing on for. Or maybe I knew perfectly that I couldn't let a material barrier stop me. If I wanted to see behind it, I had to step over that barrier and scorn the partly-equipped problem. I got to fight for my place from the very beginning and at every turning point. And the five years I lived proved me right in my foolishness.

Practical learning in the form of experiences is the best way to learn. I do think it is true and I've had

thousands; that is why I'm rarely the one to turn down the opportunity of living new ones.

The next chapters are all about descriptions and analyses of my experiences. I hope you enjoy these stories. Most of the events I talk about happened within one year. The other ones are picked from arcs of my life: my short childhood, my teen years and my early adulthood. They all participated in making me become who I am.

If you think that they got me down, that they made me bitter, supersize it all and make it twenty-three years; I'll let you do the math. Through my little stories you are about to discover my history, or at least a part of it.

I have lived a year full of events. I've had happy moments, sad moments, fantastic encounters and awful dates. I want to share all of this with you in a book. These events pushed me into a brand new adventure in San Francisco and pushed me into living past experiences again.

Some of my words may appear judgmental but are far from being intolerant. I don't really care about what people do, even the really strange ones. I actually attract that kind. Seriously, whenever a drunken guy or a mentally-ill person shows up, they come to me to ask inappropriate questions. They come to me as if they profoundly knew I was there, as if they had a radar. I'm only interested in analyzing their behaviors and figuring them out.

Moreover, when I read a book, there are pages that I like more than others; and unless I use hundreds of bookmarks, I have troubles in finding them back without going through most of the book. That is why I wrote little

stories with a reference table; so that each reader can skip right through to his/her favorite parts –I hope there is an "s"–. Fasten your seatbelt because the spaceship is taking off, taking you off, from your world to mine, so you can live right through it.

Paris And I

Paris had me entirely that night. It was dark, as I was inside. I rolled for hours through streets of thoughts. Stopping at red lights when answers were tough to find, speeding up on slopes of easy statements, I caught up with Paris. I had tried to flee Paris a few times, going all around the world, directionless, but he had some keys to my wonderings; my origins, mostly, what my first year on Earth was like and who I really was. From one block to another, from Chinatown, where I was born without parents, to Le Marais, where I could be myself without pretending, it was just Paris and me.

I had let my relationship with Paris stand on its own two when I should have stood tall and now it was backfiring, asking for its payback.

Time had come for me to choose what relationship I would have. For the time being, we had an unstable relationship, based on blackmail: Paris held my answers and my relatives and my friends hostage, tying me down to his ground; and I retained a part of the hope fix that Paris needed every day so that my fellow-citizens wouldn't fall in total despair. Every time I went out I'd say "hello" a thousand times. I didn't know most of people I said hello to, I barely knew some, and I intended my hello to a few of them. I smiled at them; I looked at them, eye to eye, and most of the time I got a reply. I wanted my eyes to send hope and courage: indeed, Life is hard but we can make it even when given bad cards. As for me, Life is a set of steps you need to accept and assume in order to grow wiser.

Wondering on the streets and wandering about my questions, I built a wall around me to isolate myself from others and to find me. Ironically, it worked so well that I quickly found myself lost, at a corner I vaguely knew.

The situation perfectly stood for our relationship: I vaguely knew what I was doing but really I was foundering in a pool of regrets and dreams on which happy moments floated. I needed something to get me out of the dark water I was swimming in, not to say drowning in, and maybe a plane was indeed all I needed.

Last summer was awful. I had my brother at the hospital, I cut off any link with my best friend and I was at a loss to detect any incentive in my life. So, between my last internship and my next step to a new career, I decided I needed a nice and sweet vacation. A few days earlier,

sitting in the RER[1], I had the impression that every station of the transportation lines held a memory of a past love. Whenever the nice lady's voice announced next station's name, faces would rush into my head and I would time-travel to live goodbyes from potential boyfriends again.

Every day in the train, I lost myself a little more. Every stop bit a chunk out of me and I was in no position to get back at it. On my way back from work one day I had enough. I felt like the entire subway network was making a mockery out of my attempts to find love and I decided to revise my position. That was when I used my knowledge on the Internet to find a location and a reasonably priced ticket that would offer the best distance/price ratio. About a week from my departure date, I announced to my family and friends that I was landing in San Francisco for ten days. And on my own. They probably thought that it was a sexual trip of some sort but the choice was only based upon a matter of financial constraints.

A few wheelings later, I was at the airport, ready to straighten things out and clear my mind with deserved sun bathing. On the plane for the USA, I couldn't do anything but think. Observe, assess and obsess had pretty much become my motto. I had prepared this trip in a material way. I hadn't figured out the real objectives though. I knew I'd better take advantage of this journey to identify all the blurry stains in my life. I also knew that ten days wouldn't be enough to solve the big mystery of my becoming but it was a good start to tackle the problem with both hands.

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1 The RER is a subway-like train in France. Its lines are longer and it mostly is on the ground. It is part of the Parisian network, as well as the subway, the buses and the trams.

I had a quick look on the Internet about what to do there. Frankly, it didn't really matter. I knew there would be a beach to crash on and there I could let my words crash on my notebook.

Even though I left as an individual, I wasn't to spend my entire trip this way. I intended to meet people, to get to know them a bit and live extra-my-ordinary experiences.

My plane had just landed and I was about to start off my new adventure in the American territory.

I was about to try to deal with my future. I could only do that in a particular present and by taking what my past was made of into account.

Travelling always has a meaning: it can denote the urge for liberty, it can symbolize the runaway, and sometimes it can mean taking risks for a friendship to last longer. One year earlier, I flew to the Canadian territory, more specifically, Montreal. That city made me realize that adventure definitely rhymed with torture.

Welcome To The Montreality

One says that you don't miss your water till the well runs dry. So as to delay this moment, the moment you realize you won't get to see your friends as often as you used to, I considered my hand and played my plane option card. I made the decision to take off and spend my vacation in Montreal, Canada, where some of my closest friends had landed for a semester or two. I had never been in Canada before, but I had visited the US three times. I assumed that Canada would look similar. I left Paris with images of Garou and Celine Dion popping into my head. I imagined that I was going to hang out with nice Quebeckers and listen to their outlandish but charming accent in the middle of an adapted architecture.

Alone at the airport, I was really looking forward to getting reunited with my friends. Despite the long flying

hours, I didn't mind travelling on my own because I knew I would socialize and befriend easily. And near the boarding gate it happened: I met Will, a French guy who was visiting a girlfriend of his, a Quebecker singer. She was making a CD and asked him to create the sleeve layout. We talked for a few minutes until boarding time. He gave me one of the CDs he had done for his friend and it had his email address on it. But still I never saw him again, nor heard from him either. I put him away in the one-shot-person file. This file is full of those who crossed my path once but whom I sometimes revisit when I wander in the alleys of my memory archives.

As soon as I arrived, my friends took me out to see what Montreal-by-night had to offer. We had drinks, danced and met some youngsters. They seemed quite friendly, especially one of them, a girl who quite naturally started talking to us. When she asked whether my friend and I were a couple, I don't know why "I wish" came out wrong and I came out right: « No, it's just me; he's not gay ». A bit confused by her misunderstanding and by the jet-lag, I sat on a couch in the club to rest for a bit. She came back and she was curiously smiling at me; I didn't even bother since I was used to it. She reached straightforward for my t-shirt and slipped some ice cubes down my collar. I gaped for two seconds and by the time I reacted she was already gone giggling. So, that was it? That was the mythical Quebecker welcome? An enigmatic French language and some incomprehensible gestures?

After two days there, and in spite of the fact that I had met up with my fellows, the nice and charming myths were gone. First, their French turned out to be not so

funny: I could barely understand their antiquated French; I sometimes asked them to speak English which they didn't take that well.

Second, the architecture was totally shit for wheelchair-users. Not only did they ensure to put stairs or at least steps everywhere they could to prevent the handicapped to access any building; but also their sidewalk is badly shaped. Because of a little space between two paving stones, and unless I didn't carefully lift the front wheels, the wheelchair hit the next stones giving either a headache or a pain in the back every three feet. Anyway, their sidewalk was a pain in the ass.

Having passed the myth of the Montrealers' welcoming behavior, I still expected them to be a party people. I had been advised on a few streets to go to and where I would surely find my way to a party. Well, I was stood up by the party people. « Here people don't go out before Wednesday night and mostly at weekends » a waiter told me with his fake French. I laughed waiting for him to reciprocate. I quit laughing when I guessed he would never reciprocate since he was being serious. How come people living in such a big and fast-paced city could decide on a common basis when to go out? Did everyone work at six in the morning? Plus, let me testify that they stuck to their rules. Canadians are not the type not to abide by the laws.

I noticed something while being there. The only two things you can get 24/7 are McDonald's food and genuine weed. On one of my first nights, frustrated at the empty streets and among the cars to avoid the killing sidewalk, I found myself surrounded with marijuana smells. Some

young quasi-beggar guys were freely and openly smoking pot outside. This was when I got rid of my sense of what was normal or not there. Maybe all Montrealers had done the same and that was the reason they had a blasé look on their face. Was that something they needed to go through to get along with the Quebecker system? Or was it me expecting coherence between strict laws on alcohol and "let's have a joint anywhere anytime!"?

I was visiting my friends who were enrolled at the university, which implied among other things actually attending classes and waking up early. But I was a tourist not a student and I wanted to get to know Montreal even if she was a bit reluctant to let me in. We had issues clearly: she and I were not compatible. All of a sudden, I realized what the problem was. She was steeling my friends from me and there was nothing I could do about it. I took every feature she had as a flaw when it was solely the way she was molded. I couldn't hold everything against her. She hadn't asked for anything and she got three of my closest friends, there, with her. Then, for a semester or two, she would be the other town.

But as a good gay tourist, I at least visited Le Village, the gay area where bars and clubs were. And in particular, one called The Parking where I settled for one Sunday night. I might have been in a gay club but I was still in Montreal. Among the lumberjacks, in a slow-motion moment, I noticed him. Him had no name, or at least none to my knowledge, and was from South America. I didn't try to know his name, because names, that night, were irrelevant. I barely remember his face, but I remember his pants to which I stayed stuck. He was wearing a pair of

blue jeans, a t-shirt and this amazing cap. It was a white cap with a white Superman logo embroidered on it. We danced for hours banded together. It was weird; in the middle of all those butches, we formed an improbable couple: a South American hunk and a European freak. But for the length of ten songs, we were a couple.

Months later, I bought the same white Superman cap. Not because I believed I would become a hunk, but because I could wear a cap that would wear my one-night souvenir.

Perhaps Quebec was like a family: exporting fake happiness outside and dealing with their own issues inside. Was I disappointed because the difference between what I expected and the reality was so obvious, almost palpable? Or was it because Parisians were more coherent?

And then I got it, they were not stolen. My friends needed to take some time off and I was going to miss them very much. I had told myself that I couldn't hold everything against her, especially because at the end I knew that even though I was leaving Montreal for good, my friends would come back to me soon.

So back circa US time, I could enjoy my new presence in the American territory. So much was ahead; I had picked San Francisco by chance and I got lucky.

The Gay Fair

Savoring the sunny and warm weather, I couldn't wait any longer before going to the Gay and Lesbian Center. Once there, I couldn't believe I was at Frisco's Gay Center. It represented so much since Frisco was the capital of the gay kingdom. I had a look around, I grabbed some flyers and that is how I learned that among many events there was a gay fair.

As I was surfing the pavement to the party, I bumped into some guys strutting down the street the other way. I figured they belonged to the fair by the look of their crazy outfits. They had even leather-accessorized for the occasion. My headset on, a map aside, I was speeding along the pavement to a gayer place. At the entrance, I took my $5-ticket to get in; even though I did not intend to immediately get off, I had definitely planned to meet

nice people.

The theme, for there's always a theme, was bears and naked. However eccentric the theme was, it took place in the bright light of a mid-afternoon. There were some panels meant to hide, to make the fair more discrete, but they mostly resulted in giving more room to gay porn posters. The crazy theme had colored everything, from the entrance to every bit of the closed area. It dawned on me that a closed area could also be an open house. For it was.

When it came to sex, I was not naive. I had done things I wasn't too proud of, so I had seen things. I knew I hadn't seen it all and I had surely not seen what I was going to. I felt like I was in Queer As Folk, this TV gay drama. Everything could happen and was already happening. Some half-dressed men were strolling around, putting their heritage out there where everyone could see it and, hopefully for them, touch it. I went for a tour around the stalls and around the guys. Despite the theme, most gay classes were represented that day: sex toys to serious organizations, slave fetishist to business-suit guys. That was when I realized why Frisco was made the Gay Capital: everything was thought of with a capital Gay.

So, half way through this half-naked men parade, I proposed a riddle to myself. I was coming from a world where the word fag could bite you if one of your feet happened to step into the forest of honesty. And I had just travelled to a completely different world where you could walk bottomless and might get a handjob from someone without even applying for one. Was I in heaven or in hell?

If I were in heaven, how would I manage to return to my inned world? Would I be able to deal calmly with answering again and again "Nope I don't have a girlfriend", with a light smile in a slight hesitation?

On the other hand, if I were in hell, how would I manage to find something between porn stars and homophobic colleagues? Would I find somewhere I am not considered a homosexual but I could still talk about it, among other things, without it being an issue?

Contrary to what my parents must have thought, that trip wasn't about finding somewhere to live or someone to love. That trip was about finding me in this somewhere with a few someones.

I am not so much of a tourist. My thing while abroad is to live as if I knew my way around. I like to wheel along the streets, acting casual; I go to banal shops, I do my groceries, and I run into my neighbors as if I belonged there. It must be one of my means to figure out where I belong. Aside from the fact that I will always have this being-rejected feeling inside of me, not knowing my origins makes me eager and restless to find this special somewhere where I can be comfortable.

Lost in this giant sexfest, wondering, I was still looking for these someones. I talked to some guys, exchanged some words. I was very flattered, by the way, when I was told I looked American and this was not because of my love handles. Then, winding through the stalls, I found myself watching a gay cowboys show. Very Brokeback Mountain. Whether you like country music or not, you've got to find it romantic. To make sure I hadn't

missed anything or anyone and especially because I had enough of the cowqueers, I resumed my tour where I had left it. As I was having a break from this half-amazing, half-freaky and half-naked place, I saw him.

His name was Jeffrey. He was a gay Asian man in his 30's and worked for an event company. I noticed him and I noticed him checking me out with his friend, David, a lawyer. I eye- and smile-replied to them, but I wouldn't be the one to make the first move. Then he did. Later, he said he finally reached for me because he liked my face.

We talked about the three of us, where I was from, what they did for a living. Just a little chat later, they proposed to hang out at David's house which was on the opposite sidewalk. I was bored and they looked normal, I mean as normal as a normal gay can look. I know that "it's all fun and games until someone gets raped" but I seized the opportunity to live the daily gay life instead of the gay tourist stuff only. That was one of the best nights of my life.

Dave was glad to meet a French guy since he had spent a few months in Paris when he was a student. He loved it so much. We started talking about the streets we both knew, about Châtelet, this amazing central place and about the French guys. I heard myself talking about how beautiful Paris was, especially when it was very sunny, and it stopped me cold. Something had just sunk in: no matter how far I would run, Paris had got a tight grip on me.

I spent hours at Dave's place, hours which feel like seconds as I look back. Time didn't matter anymore. I like

to relive those night memories at Dave's Place. I have all these lovely and warm feelings rushing back as well as this excitement, coming from those pepped-up samples of what my life could be like, if I gave it a try. For hours, the three of us laughed at big jokes, confessed big secrets and gossiped big time. Just like good old pals, we slipped away from our reality far enough for us to watch it and for troubles to stay right there with it.

« Oh my God! You came on your own! I couldn't do that, you're very brave, mister », each of them said to me at some point during the night, sometimes on booze. As the effects of alcohol took hold, they got all the more trustful. Jeffrey started talking with emotions about his *husband* who had died in a motorbike accident years before. In the meantime, David was perspiring frustration. His boyfriend, an Asian nurse in his early 30s, had total control over him. He was drinking alcohol and his boyfriend who wasn't even there didn't like it. Although he said because his boyfriend was still at work there was no harm, no foul, I could see he was uncomfortable. I could smell a light breeze of fear when he served me a diet coke explaining they had vowed a "let's not hurt each other agreement".

Drops of wine were poured in and drops of tears were pulled out. Perhaps it was the American openness that makes private things less private in front of strangers. Or perhaps it was my restrictive vision of private things. Whatever it was, some secrets were unleashed. And they were not mine. I never kiss and tell on the first night. Then I stayed where I was, in my foreign watcher seat and kept my chastity seatbelt fastened until the light was switched off. We wanted to go clubbing but we finally did not for

lack of motivation; it was too late by the time we took the decision anyway. I decided to call it a night and really believed in those newfound friendships. At the front door, I gave Jeffrey a friendly goodnight kiss, left the building full of lights and wheeled back to my Union Square hostel. Unaware of what my trip would come up with, open to anything, frightened by nothing but calmness, I went to bed and fell asleep, that night, wearing a restless smile: I had conqueered San Francisco.

I had put an ocean between Paris and me in order to live an easy life for ten days. Though, I still needed to maintain the connection. On my arrival, during a rapid tour in Chinatown, I bought a cell phone card to be reachable by Paris providing there was no talking about the problems I had left behind.

Growing Pains

Since the moment we are born, we want our freedom. First of all, we long to go out by ourselves, to hang out later and later. Then, we want to experience relationships, friendships and lovers, looking forward to getting rid of our imposed family and living on our own.

However appealing this life seems, once we are freed, there are times when we miss our old home sweet home. The great dishes cooked by our mummies. That little odor of cleaning supplies we definitely don't get again because we are too lazy to tidy up. And that lovely perfume we are used to inhaling when we use the bathroom. All those things which we need to see come to an end as soon as possible to grow up have to come by, even for just a cameo, in those dramas we call our lives. While trying to get away alive from the people who we think have control

over, we all seek partnerships, of any kind.

So, as youngsters, we are eternally yearning to become independent and that got first priority on my task list.

A life where I would be self-sufficient was what I dreamed of, or at least I thought I dreamed of. I was a social guy and I usually begged for more. I talked to anybody, agreed with going out with people I hardly knew, and loved to meet up with my friends and relatives. But my fears of failing had once again slowed me down. Obviously because of my disabilities, I always wanted to reach the hardest objectives –the ones that apparently weren't meant for me–, meet my expectations and fulfill a rich destiny.

As a handicapped child, this freedom of mine made its long way to blossom. I realized that I had to take a necessary step: I had to take charge of my own freedom. It wasn't going to be delivered to me on a silver platter. On my negotiation plan, I had foreseen I would go smoothly, move to the next stage after the other and compromise with my parents' apprehension. I started to use the lift all alone to go back and forth between my parents' apartment and the building hall.

Then, I left the building to stroll in the park of our private residence. I was feeling like a Michael Scofield, like I had prison-broken: I could breathe. I got this pinch you get when you go somewhere you're not supposed to go; except I wasn't being illegal, I only felt like I was. I was seeing two of my four elder brothers leaving the apartment and coming back thanks to their house keys. They could hang out with their friends, go out and go in.

They gave me the taste of liberty and it was winning over the fear that my disability had succeeded to anchor fast to me. And with the start of me grabbing freedom started my eternal search for more autonomy.

How was I going to accomplish those tasks and find my share of liberty? By putting myself out there and doing my best? And what was my best? According to the nurses who helped in my birth giving, I wasn't supposed to be capable of moving or feeling my legs. According to the people who first eye-dropped on me, I indubitably belonged to an adapted institution and lived a substitute life thanks to people's feedback.

So, what did I know about my best? Should I overwheel the edge every time I reach one? Each edge punctually fed on my courage which decreased my amount of courage. I could feel it. For every mount there was to climb on, there was an amount to pay for. I couldn't help but consider my courage a bank account. And if I was not in the red, if I wasn't broke of courage yet, there might have been something out there that filled my account. I think I have figured that out. Every time I'd succeed, every time I'd make it after a huge obstacle, I would turn that success into gold and make a deposit for my courage account. Thus, I could pay what it took to live new experiences. I believe in this whole philosophy.

Experiences –difficult periods or happy moments– demand courage to get through them; but, as a reward, providing you have not been stingy, it can bring your senses to higher levels, raise your mind to clearer skies or simply make you a better person. I think that that philosophy was established long long ago and it was used as a basis for the

salary scheme.

When I started using public transportation, I took on the downsides that came along the newly-robbed freedom. One of those was for me to accept the fact that there would be times when I would be treated like the trash of society, even in the most powerless situations. The thing is that I never considered myself so much of a handicapped, but there were cases that would tell me straight to my face that I was one: when the only exit I could turn to was the stairway, when I realized that I was slowing down my friends and when I couldn't do anything anymore but resort to asking for help. That was when pride and self-esteem came into question.

On the other hand, what if I were there already? What if I had already attained my best possibilities? Let's pretend I was there, what was next? Was I staying where I was? Was I going down? And did I need to go downer to go higher?

I was not a magical gypsy, I didn't know what my future was going to be made of. I barely knew what was happening the following week.

Hence, I meditated about it all. Does Life come with a TV guide thanks to which we have a one-week visibility and a few spoilers about next episodes? Since we don't get to see the big picture, are we sure we correctly classified what's possible or not? I expect the best from Life, but isn't happiness all about getting more than we expect?

I wanted to build myself a successful career, that was a given. I'd started early, right after high school actually; but some jobs on my CV didn't turn out to be the right shepherd to herd me on the road to that career.

Working Conditions

It was not my first job. I had worked since I was 18. I had been a counselor in an outdoor center for 2 years; I had become a cashier for summertime and finally started that IT internship. But it was my first job in real offices, with a suit and a tie, and with a badge to unlock doors. And with people I didn't know… and I wouldn't know, considering the way things were going. I guess I only lacked the badge to unlock people.

I had entered the premises of *La Caisse d'Épargne* for more than 2 months. I hadn't succeeded in developing any relationship warmer than the few words one-on-one-bartered with colleagues during small talks. I was as open-minded as usual, and willing to talk to people. I assume they were too much into their own lives to care about new people integrating into their team. I didn't ask

for friendships. But come on! What had happened to them to prevent them from communicating with others? Had they once been deceived by or disappointed in a colleague? Why was it so hard for them to let people they worked with into their lives? Or was it that they were so bored that they couldn't get interested in taming new people?

Also, when I got this first real internship, I penetrated a brand new world: the business world. However new to me this world was, men and women seemed to have taken some features from the planet Kids before leaving for Earth. Nose-cleaning, schoolbags and scooters were not reserved for children at all. Even in the tight ties and Hugo Boss suits world, you can easily find kids' habits more or less in disguise.

Firstly, I noticed that the "fingers in the nose" technique was making a comeback. And it seemed that everyone from every social group was concerned. The first person I caught red-handed having the childish and disgusting habit was one of my bosses at *La Caisse d'Épargne*. A handsome and classy man in his late thirties who you would never think would act that way. I guess he couldn't help it. Every time I would walk the corridor and pass his office to go to the men's room, to eat or whatever mission I made up to render my life exciting, I saw his fingers stuck in his nose. How come such a classy and well-educated man was unable to keep his hands away from his face? Perhaps his apparent good education was an illusion. Perhaps when he thought he was free from prying eyes he let himself go. Perhaps in private he was even dirtier than the one who puts it all out there.

From that moment on, I was not sure whose manners

were reliable; who was really clean and who was secretly dirty? Was the finger in the nose the new touching the balls? The thing is touching the balls was just a suggestion: when we saw a man scratching his heritage, we imagined, perhaps unconsciously, what it could be like inside his underwear. But, with the nose-fingering we get to see it, it's not inside but in sight.

Had the business field unleashed the ties used to impose conventions so much that bad-mannered gestures were now allowed? Or had society lowered its sensitivity threshold?

Secondly, climbing up the mechanical stairs, among the grownups, I wondered how much of a grownup they actually were and how big the part played by the costume was, when I saw some with their business trolley bags. It reminded me of SpongeBob bags kids had those days. What was weird was that businessmen started to have bags like that right after trendy kids did. Not only did they put wheels under their suitcases, but they also used some to commute. As I felt a little ill-at-ease in this men's world, I tried to do what I could do best: wondering and figuring out where I was and the people around. A few months later, when I finally felt more comfortable there, I drew that conclusion: business men and women are just the older versions of school boys and girls with money and freedom.

They take coffee breaks to gossip about their colleagues when at school it would have happened on the playground; they expect to have better annual evaluations than the guy next desk when it used to be grades; they form alliances and strategically sit at lunch when they

would carefully consider on whose table to put their tray down.

So, just like kids, we have our urges, our needs but we have responsibilities and these are what makes us come of age and grow up.

Let's look at the big picture, and what a picture! Sometimes I felt like I was trapped in that The Office TV-show, with a stupid boss constantly misspelling my name and colleagues always ignoring me. That afternoon, I was coming back from my lonely lunch break. I came out of the lift and ran into Heng. For once, I decided to go beyond the small talk introduction and have a little chat with him. "Hey, Heng, what have you…", then, as I was approaching the end of my sentence and as he was approaching the entrance of his office, his business phone rang. He just left me at the door without any acknowledgment. I was stunned. He found me so uninteresting that he didn't even bother apologizing for answering his phone while I was talking to him. Then, I left to return to my office, still stupefied by what had just happened. I heard on my way to my desk that he told the person he was on the phone with to hold on a second. Maybe that was to talk to me, but I also heard him close the door. And I suppose that if he had wanted to get back to me, he would have come right after hanging up. I was more than disappointed in that internship. On the other hand, I was not that into my job either. I was pretty slow and I should have gone further in my subject than where I was at the moment.

Every day, a new phrase. The phrase of the day was actually a question, but not from me for once: "Ain't cha done with your internship yet?" meaning: "You still

here?!" I only replied that I was there until late August. What the F!

As time went by, I got the impression that the only point in being there –apart from the fact that I may have learned a few things by myself– was that I was in the middle of Paris.

So, do we have to suffer to be in the middle of the hot stuff? Can we bear so much ignorance that we finally get looked at? And what happens when you're over the bearing part, do you feel endlessly bored?

They represented the kind of person that I had always dreaded becoming. I resented them so much for ruining my life. I was wrong; they had only ruined my internship. They were the scary commercials on TV about car crashes, so that even if you don't have your license yet, you get the hell scared. As of then, one of my background tasks at work would be to not become an office orifice.

Little time later, I was reaching the end of the education section of my résumé and not without emotions. Questions about my future were bobbing up and so were questions about my future friends whom I'd be hanging out with in it.

Say Goodnight, Not Goodbye

There I was, the end of my last year. The last year of this 5-year course I used to think I would never get through alive. Now, I happened to be trying to hold it back.

A few days later, I was going to be out of the student system. For so many years, I had skipped classes, had attended courses I truly believed pointless and had worked with guys I couldn't bear. All of this we, students, thought was coming to an end would unfortunately appear here and there in our working lives.

Soon enough, we'd be complaining about a bossy boss, we'd be losing our car keys everywhere, we'd negotiate million-dollar contracts; but above all, we'd be far from the ones we'd got used to seeing everyday.

As for me, I got used to entering a friendly and fun environment, in which we would talk loud during classes; we would tease the guys next table, crack crude jokes and act in an inappropriate manner. Now, on the verge of starting a career, we had to bury it all.

Thinking about our life-to-be, I found myself questioning. Did we really care about the relationships we'd been building for more than four years? Were we afraid of them falling apart? Or were we simply afraid of risking it all and heading to somewhere we had no clue about?

Why do we get cold feet when it's time to grow up whereas we've longed for that part for ages?

During this fifth season of the show we call College courses, I learned how to deal with school without those who had been by my side since the early days. I learned to be more professional, to lead huge projects. And I learned to listen to what I wanted to become and go for it. After all, is growing up staying comfortably in the waters we're used to swimming in or running towards unknown places? While previously I was craving for liberty, how come from now on I begged to remain tied up to school that closely?

My education path might seem flawless on the outside; believe me, it was all different on the inside. For example, I remember my first school day. On my first school day, I was three and ready and happy for this colossal new stage. My parents had taken care of everything, including me: my schoolbag, my break time food and my transportation. It was by the way the first day of fifteen years of sharing an ambulance car with other disabled kids.

Although my mum and dad had tried to have it all covered, they couldn't foresee the unforeseeable: my chauffeur –how Beverly Hills of me– was black. Don't see any precocious racism in that, but a black guy dressed in white and blue, to the eyes of a three-year-old kid who had already spent too much time at the hospital, it only meant going back to jail. I still remember the heat rush and blush coming from the bottom of my belly to the top of my head. I started to cry and it lent me, for the time I needed, an incredible and physical strength to grab my dad's leg and yell « not the hospital, Dad, not the hospital ». For seconds, my mum and dad remained speechless and unable to react to that item that wasn't on their checklist. Once that they had recovered from that awkward minute, they talked me into calming down, saying that there was no going back to the hospital, that the gentleman was taking me to school and that everything would be alright. I finally calmed down, put my fear aside and accompanied the gentleman along to the car, in my father's arms. I never made a scene again. None on any day of the fifteen years I used the ambulance car. None on any day of the twelve years I couldn't see my friends anywhere else but school. None on any day of the ten years when my dad involuntarily leashed me to the splints that made me believe I could be normal. The make-believe worked until the daily hurt marks from my legs could no longer be contained. I got out of the sore cocoon formed by the splints and opted for the wheelchair instead.

Another example of hard times was this term I spent in London. Through my school program, one term had to be spent in London at UCL –University College London. This trip had two objectives for school: to attend some

management and English courses and to do any job so as to validate a foreign experience internship. Arriving in early September '04, I didn't know that finding a job would be that hard. I had worked already and I thought that strong UK laws on non-discriminating behaviors would help. Of course, it did not. I was kicked out from IT shops where I believed I had a shot, thanks to my studies, and from supermarkets as well.

I started to go to this UCL entity that provided part-time jobs for students: the Workstation. I went there every day to look for jobs. I went there so much that they considered having me represent the Workstation at the annual UCL week fair. I loved that job. I could simply say that I sat for hours for three days handing out pens with the Workstation logo on them to new students, but what really occurred there was so much more than that. I was in touch with international students. I was providing information about the Workstation and trying to get them to subscribe online. I think I did a pretty good job since the manager offered me a part-time job at the Workstation itself. I was so thrilled and anxious at the same time. Would my English be good enough to be effective in my job? Would I fit there? And above all would I be helpful to those who came for help at the reception?

A few weeks passed and I found an extra job still at UCL. I became a receptionist at the Bloomsbury Fitness Centre. For two and a half months, I answered the phone, I gave locker keys, I booked squash courts and I sold refreshing drinks. I worked from ten to twelve hours a day, but it didn't matter because I loved it. It was great. Once again, I had the marvellous opportunity to meet

wonderful people, students, teachers and non-uni-related, in a peaceful environment. I absolutely crafted a life there for three months. Coming back to Paris was quite tough. I finally had everything under control and I had to go back to my partly-accessible school. I had troubles adjusting to my old life again. I started to doubt, I didn't know whether that school was the right place to be for me. One day, I went to a studies fair in order to figure out what studies were for me. As I was having a look around, I ran into my current school stall. Sharleen who was keeping the booth and giving information to potential incoming students came to talk to me. She joined me and some school mates I was chatting with about the accessibility of my school. You could expect her to adopt the business crappy speech but instead she went for the straightforward truth which left me gaping: "hey, ya knew there would be stairways, didn't ya? We warned ya at the interview, so give us a break!"

That episode almost ended my cycle at my engineering school. I kept going because it was too late to end it and I didn't want my parents to have paid for nothing. And above all, I wouldn't be quitting because of a vulgar woman with a fishmonger's accent but because I'd decide it. Until then, I did what I knew best: being stubborn.

When nostalgia is on –not the radio station, the feeling– a strange impression arises from looking back in time. On entering the engineering school, in our late teens, we were so careless, so unaware of what was ahead. We used to be focused on TV shows, video games, gossip; a wave of maturity later, we were busy creating and opening opportunities to others. We went to Africa and set up

networks, we went around the corner in a middle school to help children to get back on the right track and we were already imagining ourselves in our first job.

Bosses would look for skills we developed by ourselves in the extracurricular section of our CVs. During high school, I started an association for the handicapped and I rapidly tasted responsibility. After I graduated, I wanted more. On my first back-to-school, after high school graduation, we had our first engineering school fair, during which we got to see all the associations that existed on campus. There was that big organization that was sending computers and IT students to build up networks in Africa. However empowering that adventure could have been, I wanted something more local, because I believe that humanitarian aid can start in your own building. Then I founded a tutoring club inside of the association. I cast some schoolmates to come along with me to tutor some youngsters. For three years, I helped them out with their homework and lessons. Our main mission wasn't to increase their grades but for them to gain their self-esteem and confidence back. I learned so much with them, and I think they were impressed to see what a disabled person could do. I tried to guide them towards their own path. We weren't the same age, we didn't have the same problems, we didn't have the same background and yet something enabled us to be close: we had no clue about the future. And like with math, I helped them with the methodology.

I suggest every one of us take some time apart sometimes to assess what we've done so far and to think of those with whom we've gone that far. Why is it so hard to keep some of our priceless time to do so? Fast-living

people often use, as mottos, sentences like "Never look back" or "Never give up, never surrender" or "Live as if you were to die tomorrow; learn as if you were to live forever". I find it extremely interesting to analyze them. Why do they use such phrases? Are they afraid to realize their mistakes and especially that they can't go back and fix them? Or do they follow those catch phrases because they do feel that recollecting is a waste of time? Does avoiding this waste allow them to look further? Should we, the ones who try to figure out too much, follow their examples? Although everyone had their way to go, we all had so many opportunities, no matter what we were made of. We all had this something that would make us special to our future boss's eyes, even the ones who seemed to be failing.

Despite the fears we fasten ourselves up with, we shall cling to trust in our future and belief in ourselves. Since each of us innerly possesses multiple goals to reach, we cannot be less than fine. That said, I pondered. What was the purpose of that year? Then, I guessed: that year was about quitting hoping to be fine in favor of doing our very best to be great.

Doing our very best to be great also means accepting to commit mistakes on the way. Unfortunately, some mistakes can be lethal. In San Francisco, I met guys who had taken it back down a notch: they had quit hoping to be great in favor of doing their very best to be fine.

HIV-HOP

The first step on my Frisco agenda had given me the utmost will to continue my adventure. It had turned out to be so nice and so moving that not only did I have extraordinary memories but I also wanted tones times more. Quick assessment: I had done the gay sexperiment, the fastest friendships and the tourists visits; I wanted to meet people in another context, why not an organization?

Enjoying every moment in an attractive and busy San Francisco, I decided I couldn't not go again to the Gay and Lesbian Center. Then, I went back to the center. I expected a great and warm welcoming. I was so thrilled the last time, I thought I had pushed the door to the house of Mickey dressed in Minnie's clothes and had entered Disgayland. Instead, I was welcome by Snow White's stepmother.

I arrived wearing my brightest smile to meet a half-closed-eye guy behind fashion horn-rimmed glasses. In his good ways, his Highness deigned to give me some useful information. I took a few colorful flyers of His to bring home as souvenirs and particularly to know about the main gay happenings at the center. After a few questions, I sensed he was getting bored with answering them. He had better things to do: he was the GLC's receptionist not a receptionist. I started to feel like a weirdo talking to the Homecoming Queen at lunch. As a result, confused, I sat on a couch in the hall.

Snow White's stepmother wasn't the only detail giving me the impression of being in Disney Land; I also compared the center to Disney Land because in this gay land, I felt safe and peaceful. There was no problem hanging from the ceiling in which my head could get stuck, there were only talks, discussions, debates and ideas exchanged.

Near me, on the same couch, was this guy, Gary. He was an accountant in payables. He seemed drunk; his strangeness wasn't betrayed by his words, but by his word delivery. I didn't ask though, I didn't care. We talked for a while about our jobs. He asked me how much I made and when I told him my salary, he smiled, nodded and replied: « good for you ». Some phrases, some common places, some personal thoughts and that was it; it felt like a speed-dating or a speed-talking, as there was no dating involved. A quick « Good luck, Youenn, have a nice night » and he was gone. I don't really remember how it started nor how it ended, but I remember the conversation, like in a dream, like it hadn't happened, like another one of the one-shot

people.

Having a look at the Gay and Lesbian Center timetable, I noticed some group meetings that suited my own schedule, including *Thriving in San Francisco*. On a typical Saturday morning, I was about to find myself in the middle of some 40-something bears guys with HIV. After getting directed by the receptionist, I stopped for a while near the entrance of the meeting room. I backed out, I started to have second thoughts. What was I doing? I didn't have HIV, why did I allow myself in? Was I being a voyeur? Was it my trip to the zoo? And suddenly, I realized I had seen them with the eyes of common people, the people that see others as different. If it were a young adults group, would I be having second thoughts?

By the way, you might think that common points such as age would be factors of integration. But it wasn't what I was aiming at. I had tried the associations that were supposed to be right for me. I had twice tried one association near Nation station in Paris.

Their premises had a big glass front window that made all the young gays look like puppies awaiting something. And once I pushed the door and went to the other side of the window, I saw the other side of the association. It was not puppies inside but sharks. I had nothing in common with those guys. They had formalized their welcoming attitude in the form of a welcoming session in which you got explained how things around worked, what they did and the important values they defended such as friendliness.

They had managed to formalize it so much that they got rid of the warmth such a session meant to have

newcomers wrapped in. At the same time, they let shy youngsters sit on the floor against the wall because they were not cliché enough.

I didn't stay. I couldn't be part of an association like that. In that association, boys would worship a poor French red-haired singer, who shall remain nameless. That singer had counterfeit weirdness and contrived mysteriousness barely replacing her lack of actual personality. And I couldn't bear them ignoring the youngsters for being different. That day, I decided I would never be where only like-me people are. Then, I wanted to meet exceptional people. And I was about to.

I eventually passed the door threshold and shyly started to say hi. Like the other people I had braced myself to approach, it turned out to be great.

« – Guys please; can I have your attention? I'd like you to meet Youenn. He's a young man from Paris, in France. He will be joining us today.

– Hello! Welcome! », they all said kindly.

In one second, from shyness to relief, I felt I was actually part of the group. I did go through my catch story a few times –explaining where I was from and why I came alone without anyone along–, but it was worth it. I met nice gentlemen that day.

Some were couples and had been committed to each other for so many years, in spite of all they had undergone.

I needed to encounter people living something hard but capable of being happy. I had the impression that I

had lost my courage. I could see it when people around were complaining; I couldn't be comprehensive nor understandable anymore. I couldn't complain with them about their obstacles no matter the height they had to overcome. *Thriving in San Francisco* reminded me of it all. Their group reminded me of the path I had strayed from. I wanted to come back and have news from those sweet bears, but I knew I couldn't. Their calendar suited mine just for one time, and maybe in a lifetime.

Swiftly, it hit me: they had HIV. I had forgotten that fact for a moment. Among the laughter and the stories of everyone, expiration dates surrounded us. I froze the scene so that I'd memorize it a long time. And I used those expiration dates as a frame to fix this photograph. The thousands of miles between us were not behind the fact that our calendars matched only once, but those expiration dates were.

We all are, more or less, aware of Death but when you have lost everything in your life once, the fear of losing it all again lingers forever. In my case, it scares me so much that I can't even talk about it. Every time my parents start to address that subject, I freak out. Every time it gives me the shivers and my heart bolts. By the way, sometimes, I have nightmares where I lose a relative. Sometimes, I wake up in tears. It takes a few minutes to ensure that was just a nightmare and that everyone's fine. But for how long?

When I realized I was hanging out with guys fighting for their lives against the virus, it stopped me cold. It brought back memories I had tried to closet in. Those were not happy memories and I had to face them again. I was scared of Death. Not because it was coming after me, but because it could take down the people I love. And it had. A summer earlier, I had lost two of them within a week.

When One Door Closes...

Death never happens to be a happy ending. But in some cases, it appears to be the most unfair term, on top. She was young, my age precisely. Was. Preterit is the tense, among other things, to depict something that happens once and is over and lies in the past. I cannot believe I am already using the preterit to depict her. She passed away in a coma. I got a call from Nina the afternoon before, warning me about Pauline's state. I was a bit shocked. I left my office early, I needed fresh air. I went to see Dorian who worked pretty close to my office. We had a chat. We planned to make our ways to the hospital; I left with the thought she would survive.

Back home, I had another call. A crying Axel over the phone told me the breaking news. As soon as the news resounded in me, my core became cold. I became feelingly

out of order. She was at the hospital for a benign surgery. A simple surgery she maybe even did not care about. She got a disease, something running in the hospital. That was when benign turned into lethal. Dying of that at a young age was weird, according to Xavier whose office was in the same friend-killer hospital. Yes, for we were friends. We used to hang out together with some other fellows during high school. So much happened there. So little had survived the end of this life I sometimes missed. High school brought me from being a fearful boy to being an ambitious young man.

As time went by, we saw each other less and less. I had news from her or mainly via common friends. For about two years, we were barely in touch. Occasionally, we talked on the Internet, promising each other a prompt reunion. I guess this reunion was postponed for a while. It was hard to realize a friend had gone. Above all, because she was not in my life that much anymore. I tried to remember how she was, how she thought. She was known to be a bit depressed. She was also known to be a troublemaker. She had unleashed secrets she regretted. I had never had problems with her though. I think she was mostly lost which I could see when I looked at her. She apparently was an easy girl but she was unlucky with guys; plus, she was into looking for Mr. Right.

Her death is one of those warnings we get to help us understand real values. It holds a mirror up to our eyes to have us realize that one day it is going to be us. In these moments, what is astonishing is how we think of our own final minutes. We wonder what we would do if we learned we had a certain amount of time left to live. And

in our most gruesome fantasies, we always reason with a human amount of time. Most of us don't ask ourselves: "What if we only had thirty-three minutes to live? Seven eighths of a day and forty-seven hours?" I know it is even more macabre to think about that but the purpose of this reasoning is to point out the fact that Death strikes at anytime. It does not take chores you have to do or people to say "I love you" to into account.

I've never been so much of a reader. I remember one book though, that I read as a child. The story was about a kid who is bad at school, so bad that he is made home-schooled by his parents. He is taught the regular subjects plus practical activities, such as gardening. He unexpectedly turns out to be good at it, that is when he discovers he actually is gifted.

He then decides to use his gift to help people out. He discretely leaves his room in the middle of the night to flower up the town. As he is getting more and more professional with his gift, he wants to take it to another level and goes to the prison nearby. He creates flowered ladders so that the prisoners can escape. No one knows what is going on but one thing is certain: this little child who was thought as rubbish to society has managed to flower-scale up global happiness. Unfortunately, his gardening mentor dies and the kid searches a way for them to get reunited. He finds it, he builds a plant scale to heaven, his masterpiece. His best friend, a pony, leaves a message on the grass for people not to worry. Like an epitaph, it simply says: « He was an angel ».

I loved that story. Even if I was a child, I understood the metaphorical message. Behind the flower gift, actually

Another One... Closes

Death never happens to be a happy ending... It sounds like a déjà vu, or rather like a déjà read. It must be because another person I loved had just died. It was Patricia's mother. She went to the hospital for a simple surgery and she caught some germs there. Sounds like a déjà read too, doesn't it?

I hadn't lost lots of people but every time it happened, I traveled in time and went through the entire list, one more time. Those events were not the only triggering factors that had me back in time, my senses had their ways too. I felt that there were smells from my childhood that I could never forget. And if I happened to put them away for a while, they'd manage to come back someday.

They could be the hot chocolate surfing the air from

the kitchen to my room. They could also be the fragrance of my first beloved that turned me upside down from our first date and that would end on my last breath. And for some rare occasions, they could be the fake clean flavor that flies in a glider by the hospital, taking over all the olfactory means that you have. This one never leaves you; you might want to try hard to forget what that atmosphere is synonymous with, but in reality you can't. The cold aluminum bars that once framed you a bed have carved an indelible hold on your memory. Those smells were part of my memory. Although my time at the hospital contributed to nurturing my strength, when I look back on that period, I wonder how I made it. I feel like it wasn't me, it was some blond and strong kid that could laugh with his parents in the white and sterilized room and etch a poignant daily goodbye in his new and forever heart.

And that's not all, Folks; other dire sensations came up with the whole odor from the hospital thing. The sensation of being killed –not dying, being killed– when the nurse presses the anesthetic mask on your face. When it begins to spread its gas through the nose and abducts your body, dumping that taste that never relinquishes your memory and that makes you numb every time you recall it.

Once you managed to survive this, the last ordeal you are put through, before trying to recover for weeks, is the impression of drying up. And you don't understand why your parents can't hand over a glass of water to wet your throat that keeps, in the meantime, the gas taste. Some resentment could have stemmed from those traumatizing situations, but there wasn't any. Because if I did etch some poignant goodbyes in my forever heart, I also etched some

cheerful hellos and some warm hands in hands with my parents. That created a love connection that no broadband would ever equal.

During my childhood, hospital used to be a synonym of suffering and now it meant dying. I could bear the suffering even when a kid, but I could not resign myself to deal with the suffering caused by death.

I did not understand why people were leaving my life like that. The time before, I told myself I would not complain since I found it selfish. But that time, that was it; it was more than I could bear. So, I burst into floods of tears. I had to get it out of me, using salted water as a vehicle.

I hated to see my friends sad. Especially, the ones who had taught me so much.

I had met Patricia six years before in an association for disabled people that she ruled. And she did. She played a role model for me. She never looked at me with pity, she trusted me. I had to fight to win her over, though. When I entered the association I quickly felt like getting involved in the management and working with Patricia. I became a hybrid between volunteers, who come to give a hand, and members, who come when they need a hand. I barely needed help and I could help my disabled fellows. That was not enough. I wanted to know how things worked.

Patricia was a strong person. She actually was one of the strongest people I knew. However hard her armor was, the following Tuesday, she was about to be defenseless, core-exposed. I feared I might not find the right words and the right attitude to stand by her sides. Most of the times

on these occasions, I am at a loss as to what to say or what to do. And in Patricia's case, my head was crowded with questions. "Will she even need words or contact? Will she just need to know I am here? Should I only remind her of my presence? Or should I be there when she turns her head and looks for some support?"

Patricia had a rough history. She had been a rogue teenager and had issues with her mum. She would do everything like a boy, fight, drink, and go out behind her parents' backs. Everything except one thing. She got pregnant at sixteen. Ever since her childhood, she and her mum had a stormy and complicated relationship. I think she was saddened also because she hadn't got the time to deal with unspoken conflicts that she and her mum had encountered on their road to "like mother, like daughter". She obviously loved her mother and with time had figured that she had gotten from her more than she thought.

Actually you cannot run away from your heritage. I sometimes think about what I inherited, about the stuff I do because of my parents. I happen to be laughing because I've just realized I was reacting just as one of my parents would. For example, every time I enter a room and I switch on the lights, I whisper a nice "Bonjour" as if there were a child sleeping in the room. Just as my mum did when she would wake me up.

My dad influenced me as well. In junior high school, I used the word panties instead of using the word pants. That made my mates laugh hard but I couldn't help making the mistake, which wasn't one for me because my dad said that word.

All those characteristics we steal from our parents then become common points. They also represent our relativeness; they act as a proof that we are their rightful heirs. It even proves itself to be much stronger when blood doesn't do its usual job so that people don't look for alikeness in vain.

And, when our parents' time on Earth is up, common points change into heritage. Along with the material things our parents pass on us, it's all that is left. No more conversations, no more arguments, no more reconciliations. We are left wandering between a sad present and a past full of emotions, trying to combine them both to fake a future where our parents would exist. That was what Patricia was going through. She was lost between "let's remember not to forget" and a loud awareness buzzing like a rough wake up call.

Life seemed to have programmed a lot of thinking for me lately. Good 'n enjoyable moments, bad 'n sad periods, they all lead to existential questions. What's with my future? Will I ever find the courage I require to fulfill my dreams? Will I ever be able to move on? If so, when?

Why was I so obsessed with questioning myself about my becoming, instead of searching for my past? Was knowing where I came from the most important thing? Or should honing in on what I had always dreamed of get all of my attention? These answers, the keys that opened the doors to what I'd become, lay within my heart, right next to the people who had left.

The Status Of Liberty

It was my fourth time in the USA and my second time in California. On a slow afternoon, I quickly got to wondering. What did I like there so much? What were the reasons that made crossing an ocean and flying over many lands melt to nothing?

The answer was simple: I loved California. I loved California for what it stood for: open-mindedness, melting-pot and of course the American Dream. Everything was possible there. And I mean everything. You can land from a fourteen-hour flight and make friends, you can go out in the middle of the night and find someone to talk to, you can have no plans and still live the most exciting and wonderful party of your life, little time later.

On the calendars of the American students, there is

one period that is common to all of them, whatever majors they chose; that period is spring break. During spring break, all they think about is sex, alcohol and fun. They go thousands of miles away to forget their problems. It crossed my mind that that San Francisco vacation was my spring break. Okay in September, with hardly any making out, without alcohol, but fun was there. I think that the principle stayed the same; it was my spin break.

California had found its way to me even before I thought I could travel and go there. When I was a teenager, I was raised by all the US TV shows: some of them were soap operas starring young and rich people who would come from owning nothing to ruling the entire town in weeks, and back and forth. In order to do so, they would use the nastiest tricks they could find: backstabbing, pretending, lying and setups were almost their daily tools. And the naive and nice teenager I was started to understand the world he was living in.

These TV shows marked the limping farewell to the fantasy world. My eyes were opening, having me go from blindness to awareness. I didn't spend my teenager years being rebellious but understanding. I had stayed naïve and docile for too long. I revealed my true personality and my strength could express itself. I remember I looked at the normal route of choices and I told myself "that route is too restrictive, that route isn't good enough for me".

In San Francisco, I seized the rare periods of solitude I granted myself with to observe. I wanted to observe Californians and their way of life. Something that you cannot miss while visiting the Golden State is how *most* belongs to California. Everyone wants to be the thinnest,

the fattest, the smallest, the biggest, the smartest, the dumbest, the fastest, the slowest, all because they rhyme with best. But they merely rhyme. There, people try to become the best through another superlative. When you're a Californian, is willing to be the best that meaningful? Can you ever become a Californian if you don't go somewhere extreme by trying as hard?

In a state where you choose to get married between Hawaii and Las Vegas, or get a divorce in a blink in the Dominican Republic and where millions of dollars are only at hand range, how come trendy rights are not established yet? Rights such as gay marriage, adoption for homosexuals, etc. that have been granted for years in some countries.

So, more than *why are Californians so big?*, the question is *why are Californians so big on pretending and appearances?* Why do their eyes display such an urge to be looked at? Big theories have it that we build ourselves up in function of each other's looks. Well, if these theories are right, Californians might just be onto something. Maybe the more eyes you get on you, the more possibilities you can go fish to understand who you are. Because behind bleached teeth and tanned skins, they're exactly like us all.

If California stood for the American Dream, the Golden State also stood for *my* dream. My dream based on my finding out what I wanted to do. I was unhappy with my current job. I knew I was not meant for that regardless of how great that adventure had been. As I was about to fight for a new life, I stood wondering. I used this bad job experience as a horse to trot through the forest

of opportunities I had lying ahead. But what if my horse failed me, id est my reason why proved me wrong at some point? What if the reason I was fighting for vanished away? Would I assign the charge to Risk Department? Would I find the strength to resume the fight and go to the end? What if my job was not the reason I was unhappy? I guess that the fact of doubting out loud would equal to giving up. Maybe I'll still have unhappy moments at the office. And yet, let's face the truth. I had had bad bad times already. So, when I would start all over again, I'd do my best to avoid the causes of my job going awry and I'd yearn for the very best to happen. Because taking risks is what makes Life exciting, searching for job opportunities might just be the starting point of my destiny.

Questioning had once again struck my mind heavily, I needed to take a break. As an act of free will, I decided to come back from the beach via streets I hadn't tried yet. So, there I was climbing up some giant mountains, sweating bullets while pushing my fat ass up. I was passed by a blond Californian runner who felt so pitiful that she stopped to help me. While she was helping me nicely, I realized that I had climbed too far and I had to go down to go back to my hostel. I was about to face one of the worst wheeling moments.

You must think that wheeling down is easy since there is nothing to do, but that's not true. To brake the wheels I use my hands. Then, the stronger I have to brake, the worse shape my hands end up in. In order to balance my weight, I was on my two rear wheels. The hill was so steep that I had to contract my hands so hard. I was feeling my hands literally peeling off on the rubber's in-relief patterns of

my tires. But the physical pain was nothing compared to the psychological mess I was in, when I started to think I was living my last seconds. I thought I wouldn't be able to brake my wheels anymore and that I'd be hit by a car a few feet further. Or if I stopped doing a wheel and put the front wheels on the ground, I'm sure they would have had me on the ground as well in no time. The road had bumps that I thought would have speed-bumped me cold. For good. While flipping out, I didn't get any flash before my eyes, like it is said to happen in near-death experiences. Though, the idea of my stomach flipping before my eyes made me more prudent in preventing near-death experiences from happening again.

I was feeling that way, just as when something bad happens and we question the reason we even began, with no regard for all the good it might have brought in the meantime. What if the reason, the one that pushed me into the job fight faded away during the battle? What if, like a kid's training wheels, it were coming off and leaving me alone in my crusade? What if the initial reason was just a pretext to make me a soldier ready for the war? So considering all of that, should I be resentful when the reason seems to abandon me or grateful that it simply played its full role: letting me see the bad in my life and giving me some momentum to run towards another step in Life?

Sometimes, methinks that I need a magical wand or an enchanted brooch in order to make it. But magic doesn't really exist, or does it?

Jejune Bells

Christmas and New Year's Eve were to happen soon. As Santa and new resolutions were taking over our minds, a weird air was enveloping us. An air composed of joy and love.

During this period, everyone gets that little happy shiny people behavior. Every place you're strolling on, every location you're going to, every mall you're shopping in, all your head can turn to is the Christmas spirit, floating, next to the oxygen we breathe, like a virus gas.

Besides the buying fever, it's also the opportunity for most people to be nice. Is it because Jesus Christ was born in the middle of this time of craziness centuries ago? Or do citizens need occasions to release their open-heartedness they so much restrain the rest of the year?

It's amazing to see the beggars, in the subway, considered humans again instead of being pushed away towards the frontiers of dignity. It's fun to feel all the attention we are paid to on the sidewalk when we are usually collided without pardon-begging. It's unbelievable to experience the efforts administration makes, while we're barely taken into account the few hours they agree to work throughout the year.

Sometimes I look back on my passed Christmas times. When I was a child, I could get overexcited just thinking about Christmas morning; about the big white sheet covering the presents on the couch in my mum's private room. About the challenges we would make up with my brothers to see who was bold enough to check under the secret sheet. And finally about the seconds I would discover my little shoe that throned on top of the huge stack of multicolored boxes.

I remember one particular Christmas gift-opening session. I was offered a Gameboy, that old black and white video game from the 80s. I still feel my heart beating to its climax and the tears of joy running down my cheeks. Nowadays, such a game would be an insult for a kid or vintage for an artist. But back then, coming from my not-so-rich sister, it meant the world to my kid's eyes.

And back circa now, as a grown-up, the Christmas spirit was quietly vanishing over the years. With the Christmas spirit vanishing, the overexcited part of me went missing too. As time went by, I became more and more aware of the bitterness that was tarrying inside of me. Each winter pulled the trigger a bit farther; at first, I only had emotional dips but as a teenager I yearly slipped

into enjoyment coma. The weeks following Christmas led me to recovering and after a certain period, I got back to normal. And I realized that after a coma, there always was a period.

December, this month spent *en famille*, was not the cause of it. The upcoming January was. I guess my dislike for my birthday hails from there. When Christmas approaches, I know that my birthday is coming too, in a light unconscious way, hidden in its furrows. And each year, I can't help but feel a bit depressed not because my age increases, no; because no matter the age, it always brings me back to early 1984.

I guess that disposing of over-excitement for Christmas was pretty much normal and it happened to all of us. Though, was it normal because we all stopped believing in this whole Santa thing or because we shouldn't believe in magic past a certain age? Maybe that was why people looked so bored when going through their daily routines. Maybe they just quit believing to simply know. Had fatalism become our new ism? What was the place for the unexpected and the unpredictable?

Those two were so dead and buried that we asked for generosity to be scheduled. Following the example of Mother's Day or any other of the Whatever's Days, did solidarity and altruism require a special reminder in our busy agendas? Perhaps it was because I didn't like to act like anybody else but I couldn't be satisfied with being given times to do my duty as a citizen. How could that be right? It was as tricky as Valentine's Day. It'd mean that if it didn't exist, low-initiative people couldn't randomly pop up with love gestures when they feel the time is right?

Considering the lack of general solidarity, I tried to reflect. What if we did away with traditional occasions? Would people manage to open up by themselves? Would their open-heartedness be spread out all year long? Or would we dig even more in the ground of individualism?

Since my first internship in Paris, I had been using public transport. The Parisian train network was a parallel planet, "Planet Selfish".

Some crazy people could hit you, walk on you just to get into their train, while another one was coming in the next minute. There were no rules any more, no Good Samaritan either, or just the beginning with the beating part.

All my talking isn't about doing the right thing, looking out for people, but it is about being out there and mentally ready to do so.

While some people need guidance to their citizenship, others take on theirs very seriously by helping out. But what does it take to realize that we can be the latter kind? At what age is it normal to get ahead of our own needs to think outside the self?

The Super Selves

From time to time, we, late teenagers or young adults –pick the one that suits you best– have a debate about choosing which superpowers we would have. The pool of answers is far from being bottomless. Sky-diving, thought-reading and whisper-hearing constitute the most of it.

The surprising part is to discover how deep people, in most cases our friends, can plunge into arguing, however silly and unrealistic that conversation is. The exercise is famous to be helpful in getting to know your acquaintances better. Bringing up the game and hearing people participating in it makes them reveal a little bit of their inner selves. The most heroic ones will go for the Superman kit, the fashion gals for the Wonder Woman outfit, the shy ones for the Invisible Man ability and the fast-driven ones for Flash Gordon power. Is there only one

magical aptitude that can sum us all up?

Maybe abilities are a symbol for our qualities and nobody only relies on just one. I can have empathy –the shrink type– but sometimes turn out to be Batman material in order to seamlessly dispense justice.

And what about the costumes? Why do those costumes, flashy as hell or black as death, appear so attractive? What's the meaning of those? Is being good bad? If it's not, why do they need to go undercover to do so? And why doesn't Lex Luthor need one to go all villain on Metropolis? Is money bad guys' disguise? And is being good such a weight that you need to change your identity? Or is a latex outfit just a metaphor saying that when you choose to be a good person it changes you to the core, so you are able to bear people's gratefulness? Why would Clark Kent make so much effort to keep his identity secret? After all, he is the man of steel, what is he scared of? He might be made of steel but he is sure smooth, like the rest of us. I think it tells us that no matter how hard we are on the outside, we are definitely softer on the inside.

In that kind of discussions, it's always about power(s) and never weaknesses. Whatever the movies, the TV shows or the comic books, they portray a guy having superpowers and the weaknesses that come along. Why is it that people don't imagine, even a tad, what their weaknesses would be like? Are they coward? Or is it just that they don't get too serious about it? Thinking it through leads to weighing the responsibilities, emerging from the dream abilities. Is a responsibility the ability to give a prompt response? Or is it simply a contract, sometimes tacit, people sign up

to so there is someone to blame for when something bad happens?

I remember myself, as a kid, in front of the TV. I wasn't watching TV, I was living TV. Like the characters in the animated series, I used my powers, I transformed, and I warned my team fellows. For we were a team. But only on Wednesdays and on holidays. And a screen divided us. In a way, those shows succeeded in transmitting good values to me.

I watched TV so much that I used to believe very firmly that one day I would get superpowers. I was just waiting for my turn to come. I thought I was like Superman, that I'd fly when I'd turn 18. Well, I was eighteen for a year... five years ago, and still nothing planned out in my agenda. Although that period was over, something had subsisted. Some parts of the fantasy world which I used to rush to were only a slippery hill away.

Even though I hadn't been using the sky as my new sidewalk, I did develop a power of my own. When you unintentionally draw attention to yourself, either you choose to ignore it or you start analyzing what people's eyes reflect to you. I had worked on it. Actually, I had been working on it for a long time, so much that I relied on it to figure people out. And sometimes I could be pretty good at it. How ironic; I could figure out many people but not myself.

The main message of those comic books can be summarized as the following: if you have a gift and use it to help people out, you may embrace a future that no fortune-teller can predict, or even imagine.

Now that I have buried the idea of gaining superpowers (duh!), I still believe that the notion of superpowers does exist. Who gives us hope when we send a note in a bottle (some say they are physically in the bottle)? Who provides us with trust when we feel left out and ignored? Who lends a hand when we think the entire world has turned its back on us? The ones who do these wonderful things must be called heroes. Contrary to common beliefs, those guys are accessible, they walk among us. Every one of us might even be one of them. So, the EPT test of the wannabe superguys could be to think of people and be out there for them. Then, do we need superpowers to be considered a hero? Or simply remember to take a hot cup of courage and a fresh toast of faith every morning?

Superman's story is very deep if you take a close, near microscopic, look at it. Clark lost his parents in a terrible accident and he found out that he was very different. He lived a traumatic situation as an infant and still he is very strong. What is Clark Kent's message in this? Is it about wearing our underpants over colored tights to feel super strong? Or is it about the fact that we can still make it after a messy start? Clark Kent tells us that fate isn't written in our birth. He also reminds us that the road of Life is paved with fate. His hopeful and subtle sermon comforts us into thinking that we can all be a superman in our way.

It doesn't mean we wouldn't have to deal with green kryptonite moments sometimes, on the contrary. It means that even though these bad moments might show up, we would be flying towards the seventh heaven a lot, surrounded by our beloved ones.

Another symbolic meaning comes from the way he

assumes his primary-color costume: providing we stand by our choices, we can become a great person.

When I was a kid, I was told I was a case of resiliency, that I had that psychological strength characteristic of children living traumatizing situations. But I betimes come to doubt it. Maybe I didn't really have this resilience aptitude. Maybe I pretended to be fine and masked the periods I was slipping away from the resilience process. Sometimes, I happen to go through depression periods; does it mean I quit being strong? Does it mean I gave up on fighting for my place? Resilience is defined as the skill to endure hardship. Maybe I don't endure hardship, maybe I let myself sink into it. Or maybe sinking and then rebounding form a necessary milestone on the road to resiliency.

So, what should I retain from superhero stories? That flying and being invincible are too cool? Or that being strong and having a weakness is okay as long as coping with it is part of the deal?

Citizenship is a crucial value for me. It might be one of the rare teachings that outlived my childhood church lectures. But while in San Francisco it went from foreground to background as I let myself enjoy some small time.

Glam As You

On my fourth night, I went to the gay borough to feel Frisco's nightly groove. I tried to dress up sexy gay for I didn't know if there was a protocol. Would I be checked in at the entrance? Should I have worn a tuxedo? I was stressed out, it was the *Champs Elysées* of gayness after all.

I entered that bar club I had seen while taking a look at the neighborhood. It was funny, I felt like I was in Paris. The music, the whiffs and the guys, everything sounded, smelled, and looked alike. So much that I had the impression that I had Stargated back to France.

In retrospect, I realized how far I had gone since I had first taken the plunge and been in the Paris gay area. After I had accepted the fact that I was gay, I started going

out thinking the gay community was a welcoming family accepting members of any kind. They were discriminated against so they couldn't judge anyone, right? I also used to think that anyone feeling discriminated against couldn't be intolerant. I thought wrong.

Hanging out in the gay community is like going back to school. When you enter it, depending on your style or your tastes, you belong to one group or another. You have the queers, the pretentious fashion victims who think you are the victim, the bears, the young, the hip-hop gangsters and the hop-hop lovers. There, every journey is hard, not necessarily the way you wish, and you never know whether you're going to leave with more friends or with more shame. But the cavalry is worth living when it is the starting point of meeting lovely people who will play the role of the photographer that helps you out in your developing process. A few months and I had understood how I should behave in this area. I didn't mind the shame any more. I was only focused on finding those lovely people and ignoring the other ones. So, I wouldn't feel shy or embarrassed, in clubs, whatever the country.

For a minute, my spirit quit my body and astral-projected to the ceiling, where I could see myself encircled by these guys. They all had their routines and their choreography. It wasn't my first time at a gay club, but was it what I wanted to experience? Did I like immersing myself in the gay jungle to fight to make out with some strangers?

After a short while there, a guy started to talk to me. I immediately knew I wasn't interested in anything involving us being less than a foot away from one another.

He replied, after I told him I came from France, that he came from the bloody UK. He went on our origins to come to the conclusion that England and France were pretty close so he would love to make out with me. Nevertheless, he offered me a polite way to escape this repellent offer. He stated that he was probably too old for me with which I agreed. Come on, I was 23. I know I like guys older than me but not guys whose next party is a celebration of their 50th.

The music was getting worse and worse, and I found that curiosity was won over by boredom. I was on my way out, winding through men, when a Mexican I had noticed that same night stopped me right there by grasping my shoulder. « Where are you going? » he asked me, with his Iglesias accent, surprised I was going home so early. We exchanged a few words. And out of nowhere, without a warning, not even one of those silent pauses that say "oh my! It's going to happen", he kissed me on the lips. I confessed to him that I would have to stay considering what had just happened. I was delighted not only because at last something had occurred but also because he was hot. I tried to establish a conversation but I was still stunned by his kissing. I smiled to him and tried to, but only managed to start the kind of talk you have in a lift. A few babbled words later, we went for a second shot. Less and less far from one another, kissing sessions went from shoot 'em up to lick 'em up. One of his buddies came and spoiled the moment by informing him they had to go. In a fragment of second, a fragment of life melted down in History. I did try to follow him up till his car but I stopped myself when I realized it was too much "run after Prince Charming" of me. Since I was out, I decided to call it a

night and went home.

Even if that was just kissing, wild happenings always leave me restless and thoughtful. It's actually one of my flaws: every time something occurs, even the slightest thing, I rethink my whole life. I can't just enjoy what happened. I can't stay at rest and act cool, knowing that I have the sensation of a guy's lips on mine. And, I can't let myself be spontaneous either. For example, I never make the first move with someone. What does it reveal about me? Does it reveal I am the biggest coward or that I deserve the wisest award?

Many questions arrive and as I can't answer them all, I wonder why, bringing in new questions. In the past years, this flaw had slowed me down. Questions had been an emotional barrier to me. It had blocked me from having a real love life. I had seen friends have boyfriends, girlfriends, makeouts and breakups. I hadn't let my true self live those experiences. On the other hand, it had saved me from troubles and heartaches.

Those days, the real unsolved question had been "should I question myself? Should I change anything about me?" The thing is I am labile; I take decisions, I make choices and live my life. On my way back, I thought about my Mexicomic adventure at the club. I had finally obtained what I had come for: the illusion of belonging there. I was having a wonderful time on a casual evening, licking someone else's tongue that I had just met (both of them) and nothing else really mattered. Certainly not where I came from, certainly not where he came from and certainly not what the following day would be made of either.

So, I had a past and I had a fate. But I realized that my past was written and couldn't change any more. My future was based on two variables and I was one of them. San Francisco was slowly helping me into understanding that good things could happen to me. Even if I thought I knew me, I had it wrong. And if I had thought that I was following a plan made up by the stars I was even more erroneous.

Mr. Write: Author Rising

I remember the day when I was having a friend validating a comment, signed Youenn, that I wanted to post on his blog. He liked my comment and joked about hiring me to write some more of them. However tempting the offer was, I had to decline since I thought I had a never-changing writing style. Then, he said this one thing to convince me and that left me thoughtful: « you can always sign UN! »

What hit me wasn't the fact that I had a pseudonym but rather that it might change the way I write. Does it? Does a pseudonym help in letting ourselves go? Aren't we able to take responsibility for what we think? Or is it just a way to write touchy stuff that doesn't seem to matter to us and avoid the backfiring risks?

Pseudonyms have been a thing for centuries. The best authors have used some to protect themselves, to protect their families or anybody they care for. Some people like to be called by a made-up name to make sure their story will become history. In most cases, is a pseudonym a synonym with a mask or a stamp?

Since my early adolescence, I've been writing. I've written about personal experiences, about my feelings, about the people I've met, about the ones who left and about the ones who simply made an appearance in my life. Even though most of my papers are picked up from actual facts, how can I be so sure they are the exact reflection of who I am or what I felt at that time?

Authors who enjoy being read want their works to be everlasting in order to feel everlasting. As a wannabe author, this idea of leaving footprints, or wheelprints in my case, doesn't astonish me in the least. On the contrary, if fragments, that used to be part and parcel of one body and soul, succeed in standing for us long after we're gone, we have to start off promptly. And as they would represent us, they'd better be good.

For example, some will reveal their innermost lives while others will snake through their emotions to elude unfolding dark secrets. Should we choose between being transparent and being cloudy waters from which our words are extracted, representing the only clear spaces? Does a borrowed or a made-up name enable us to veer off course more easily? Is it a way to have the impression to live a life we don't have the guts to live for real?

Depending on the people we do business with,

we release more or less arrogance. Depending on the people we are in a relationship with, we show more or less commitment. Depending on the friends we are close to, we develop more or less trust. That given, how can we manage to once and for all figure out who we are? If we forever display different faces, how do we know when it's actually us? How to position ourselves between without-a-personality people –also commonly called nice people– and that Two-Face villain? Therefore, it is so challenging for those who wish for their memories to remain in other people's long after their bodies have faded away. Thus, like statues, do they need to stop being ever-changing to be everlasting? Or like stars, should they evolve endlessly and relish what they've done which is the basis of rising to fame?

Whether we are writers or not, whether we want to leave our footprint in History or not, we are all looking for this one answer to the question: who am I? My point is that we are not made of a singular element. In fact, even if we once figure ourselves out, the answer is ever-changing. So, we definitely never get full closure on ourselves. To get the nearest we can, we all have our methods. Some of us resort to using the Magic 8 ball; the pool ball that magically solves our inner problems solely by being shaken all around.

My method includes asking people questions. I asked a friend of mine the crucial question that every newly-gayed guy is asked: "where are you in your coming out process?" Why does that question pop in as often as traffic circles in France? Why does it even matter? Why do we gay people care so much about knowing other gays'

positions towards the inside out of their own closet? Is it really because we care about their lives and sanity? Or is it only meant to help us in defining ourselves?

I started to tell more and more of my friends. All of them took it the good way, not without surprise though. Antoine, one of them, thought I was kidding. So I had to go through it again and again a few times, which wasn't very pleasant, but it remained harmless. The thing is I don't wait as long as I used to before avowing the truth about me. I had waited three years before telling one of my closest friends. I'm never waiting that long again.

So, the ultimate issue is not how many friends you come out to, but rather how many of them are close enough to be come out to? And yet, the problem remains the following: how to measure friendships? Is there a lab specialized in closeness measurement? When do we know that close is close enough?

Our selves defined is the ultimate answer that only a handful of the luckiest among us can ever get to. I took a ten-day journey to have a clue about the right path to look for and I found a roadmap.

Blind Date Uncensored: Dates From Hell

There were days when dates were not that good and rather bad. Some were so ugly that I needed to write them down in order not to forget.

One of the reasons I started to write this book was mainly that one date du jour. Of all times, this one was the worst I had ever had. First, the guy made me wait about thirty minutes which I particularly hate; and second, not only was I totally disappointed with his look –he wasn`t ugly but not attractive, simply the spark was missing– but he also ended up dragging me to this Best-Buy-like store to get his fax machine fixed. Wait, for this is not the bad part yet. Even if, as soon as I saw him, I knew our relationship couldn't reach an intimacy any higher than friendship, I was still open to getting to know him.

Well, that lasted a few minutes, till we entered the repair shop. He had to bring his machine to the After-Sale Services department, which he did while I was waiting for him, again already, a few feet away. I wouldn't have imagined back then that I was waiting back there for nothing. The guy left me. He left me inside that store I was forced to enter, without even acknowledging me with a "Goodbye, I am being a huge bitch to you". I couldn't believe it, so I tried to find him and called him twice on his cell. It might seem weird but I didn't feel that pissed off. For one part, I was relieved I didn't have to think up excuses to time limit our rendezvous. For another one, I thought "what the F is going on? Did he really have the balls to abandon me in the middle of the DIY department?"

Fortunately, I had better plans. Some friends of mine from school, who had created a band, were rehearsing after class. So I decided to go and have fun with them. I was getting more and more dazed: I was amazed that every new date got me more amazed regarding its worthlessness. And yet I couldn't let go of trying again and again.

That date was extreme: everything was wrong. It reminded me of that US TV program, Blind Date, where they try to fix up dates for couples. It reminded me more particularly of this special edition in which they broadcast the top worst matches. Like in the program, I had bubbles above my head with sarcastic and funny comments in them. Nonetheless, unlike in the program, there was no camera, no witness, nothing else but my mind to burn that one session of crappy-dating.

One day, on my way back home from school, I had a thought about romantic relationships, in general. I had

been dating guys, one after the other, but it was never working out. On rendezvous, we shared laughs, we talked about our lives, we discussed our feelings, we disclosed secrets that even great friends didn't know about, and sometimes kissed. All steps were taken faster and faster as time went by and the sequence got more accurate. Every move was under control and satisfied a certain choreography. Were Mr. Ford's industrial techniques being applied to relationships? Had we gone so far that kissing and opening up to a stranger meant nothing more than a "spin the bottle" game?

I met this guy on a Saturday night. He was another one of these guys from the Internet. He seemed immature, physically and above all, mentally. The worst part was that he didn't have anything to say. I had called him the night before; we had spent big time on laughing and making fun of each other. He sounded nice. Well, I believed I did too. But back to the date in Central Paris, according to the look on his face, he was losing his time. He had this gay Parisian blaséness: he was young and feeling strong, putting his arrogance high and giving an impression of a mix of "bored now, been there, done that" and "Get lost! I live by no rule but my own" which many teenagers seem to own and are proud to display. I wanted to see the bottom of it and I felt I needed more action.

Actually, looking back on time, I guess both of us were in need. At the moment I expected it the least, he started to come onto me, playing horny. I fell for it. But not for him. We kissed; it was weird on different levels. We were kissing, both individually, not as a couple. The connection between us was kind of intense; the sexual

tension was reinforcing the liaison. I found that he acted a little strange though. He was playing horny man and hug-starving teenager at the same time. His twofold personality was scaring me off: he was unexpectedly swinging from Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde to Dr Jerk-ill and Mr. Eyed.

He finished his beer and his hand-made cigarette while I quaffed my coke staring at him. We were so different and not in the good way, not the way that makes people closer. We could have left the bar long before the end of the rendezvous, but something that we both felt pushed us into waiting, like we owed it to one another. We waited until it didn't make sense, knowing that we wouldn't plan another date.

We got out of the bar and we went separate ways, each his way. Like in a divorce by mutual consent, we agreed with the fact that we had had a good time, but it wasn't enough, it wasn't a relationship make.

Those terrible dates left me questioning. Was I that full of flaws? Didn't I have a scintilla of something to attract nice guys and make them willing to stay?

There were days when dates were not that good and rather bad; some were so ugly that I needed to write them down in order not to forget. But some in their so-soness left something as good as the souvenir of a midsummer night's dream.

AF1205 Flight: Morocco Delayed

Hicham was a Maghrebi immigrant from Morocco, cute and totally masculine. We had our first date just three or four days after we started talking over the Internet. We had this rather short phone call and decided we should quickly meet up to get the chance to get to know each other.

The rendezvous was going okay; it wasn't being disastrous but it wasn't being perfect either. I was doing most of the talking in a Latin quarter café. I went through my studies, what I liked or disliked in general. While I was talking, he gave me the impression of being slow-motioned. He sometimes asked questions, though, which indicated two things: he understood what I explained and he was a bit interested in what he was listening to. He also explained to me what he did for a living. He

was a plumber and was working at that time in a famous Parisian restaurant. It was nice because in a way we were so different that it made him refreshing. He was not a student and had quite a different background from mine. That time, we were so different in the good way.

He could be thought to be the gay Arabian cliché, lost between two sexualities, but Hicham was smarter than that. He was very open. He didn't live in the world where the fantasy of having a family and a male fuck buddy is more than okay.

By the way, I had met many guys like that: the guys who bring you to their house where you can see their children's belongings and feel their wives' presence. I particularly remember those two, Rafik and Youcef.

The first one brought me home once, or at his family's home I should say. I didn't really fancy him; he was just a practical guy I could meet occasionally. He worked for a Parisian airport, as a baggage handler. I could barely understand what he said and I think it was the same for him, considering his answers to some of my questions and his phone messages. I had gone to his place to gain this experience and because I was always curious to get to know another gay's lifestyle. It was weird and I'm not sure I'd do it again at his or any other husband's place someday. And if I remember this one shot and if it's not for the sex part –or for the bad sex perhaps– it's mostly due to the general atmosphere. Despite the situation, he seemed very respectful. He had turned down all his family's pictures before we started and he never mentioned them other than in specific talks.

The other one, Youcef, was quite openly gay. I had run into him a few times in the Parisian gay area and even in the bars. Though, on our second appointment, he announced me, to my total surprise, that he was ending his gay life. According to him, he didn't really care for sex anyway since he didn't like it. He was giving up and away what he was to marry. He had already done the religious part. He was the one to break me in. He broke me in so that I was from that time on expecting anything to happen when it came to gay people.

Concerning my rendezvous, most of the times I remember abstract things such as feelings, the ambiance, an emotion from a guy's caress. But with Youcef, I remembered it all, from the first second.

I had just come out of the swimming pool and was waiting in front. I found myself checking out guys to make time fly by and also because I wasn't really sure of what he looked like since online pictures are often liars. He arrived and caught me in action. He yelled from where he was coming from, a few feet away, "What are you doing? Were you staring at that guy's ass?", pointing at the guy with his finger. My face turned all red. That was him. He could say anything embarrassing, especially to you, out loud except what he couldn't or wouldn't face. I had a good time with him, we could talk about very deep, personal stuff you only let your closest friend drop a finger on and simultaneously we were playing this get closer, get hurter game. He knew I liked him and if he had wanted to, I was ready to really go out with him, to be more than mere friends. Sadly, I played that game till that one time too many. And I got *hurtest*. I didn't want to see him again.

Even though I bore a grudge against him, I pitied him. I was disabled and gay and my life was easier.

Back to Hicham, our moment had to come to an end when one of his colleagues came up to get something from him so he needed to leave, unfortunately. The café we were in was on the first floor and the exit was on the ground floor. We then reached for the lift calmly. I was about to leave my date safe and sound which was, according to my criteria, great for once. I knew he was not The One; but I wasn't, above all, aware of the role this Moroccute would play later in my life. As I was reviewing that "plus one" date, I entered the lift, and out of nowhere so did his tongue with mouth. I've got to admit it, I was completely stunned. It didn't last long, didn't go wrong either, but I wasn't at all expecting a kissing in a lift. I must confess; I really loved it, because it was spontaneous, on his initiative and unpredictable. I left the mall with an impression of well-being, an impression that my day had been whole. One out of an endless year of love-empty dates, that wasn't not so bad after all. I knew that Hicham and I wouldn't get the "couple of the year" award. But that was a damn good date, one among the best kind; the kind you remember for a long time, the kind you feel butterflies inside your stomach by the memories of it.

Among the many things I had learned about the Moroccutes was the fact that they need contact, they are very tactile. Their approach of closeness was physical while in other countries, people were less straight. How ironic. I guess that each had their way to closeness. For some people, getting closer was achieved via an object, such as cigarettes.

Let's Mock The Smokers

Smokers start earlier and earlier these days. Everybody, who is either somebody or nobody, smokes. As I don't have any addiction, I tried to understand the addicted ones and their relation with their bad habits. I suggest that we smoke out what's unspoken. There was a place in central Paris where all kinds of people met, called the Fountain of Innocents, in Joachim du Bellay place. They walked by each other and formed a heterogeneous mix that worked just fine. It was the perfect place to observe people since they came from every caste.

One day, in Les Halles, I started to observe the formerly-entitled sinners, we banally called smokers. I guess I wanted to figure them out. Some basic interrogations popped into my head. Why do they smoke? What for? Are there unsaid but widely-known reasons and purposes?

Maybe there are reasons aside from the fact that they've become addicted and that they feel peaceful and prone to bear stressful situations. If so, what's the catch for them to find it more important than their health?

In junior high school, beginners want to brave the forbidden. They are at an age when they need to play bad to know what's right. As for them, they know life through others' points of view. From that moment and onwards, they feel like living their own lives. In high school, it has become normal; it has replaced traditional candies or snacks prepared by mummy. More than living their own lives, they take charge of them. One more time, they think they must reject the parental way of life to learn their proper how-tos. Finally, when at last they are young adults, they can't stop. They even advise us while smoke-exhaling "Don't commit the same mistake: don't start smoking, 'cause that's the key to the solution!". At that point, they totally play the parents' role by giving their dos and don'ts. I remember when I was given these funny warnings. The more they gave me parent talks, the more I replied with kid talks.

As time goes by, they take care of cigarette managing like other daily duties, such as fetching the children at school, doing the groceries and picking up the dry-cleaning. They love to remind themselves of it out loud. "Damn, I have to go to the smoke shop!" For some of them, it represents such a load that they could ask a friend "would you mind picking up my kids at school? Otherwise, by the time I get there, the store will be closed".

Later that week, I was having lunch at the Fountain of Innocents, still in Les Halles. There, at this very same

fountain, I had met Felipe, a nice Latino. Let's say, I kind of see people. I feel it when they have something even if it's small. If it is enough to faze me, I believe it is worth following the white rabbit into this new *agujero*. He definitely had this something and it was much more than simply interesting.

He, as well, saw people. I rarely met guys like that. Guys who analyze what they see, what surrounds them in a smart way. He used to study anthropology at the university but he had quit because he thought university didn't suit his expectations. He was trying to get back in the pool but he was sometimes defeated by the tribulations of the French administration. Still, he had never stopped working. Felipe was hanging out almost every day at the Fountain of Innocents. He considered it a reference mark, a place where he felt safe. He didn't like to be home, which was surprising since he needed reference locations to be fine. The reason was that he also needed people around. He needed to enter people's lives and understand them. Where did they come from? What made them end up here? What did they do every day?

He liked to write both in Spanish and French since he was from Colombia. I asked him if the things he wrote about revealed a bit of himself. His answer was clear: « I don't like to be figured out; I like to guide people on a fuzzy path ». That was pretty much him.

I found him gorgeous. And so did girls. On the very same noon time break, we were talking and a young girl, less than twenty, closed in on upon us and started to heat on him. She used the "You come from another country, don't cha? Where are you from?" cruising method. When

he replied from Columbia she went on « OMG! I cannot believe it, my mother is a Peruvian as well! It's a small small world! » Quite quickly, he found out she didn't even speak Spanish. When she gave him probably the lamest excuse –i.e. « my father didn't want us to speak Spanish at home »– he released his bitchy self on her. After a few sentences, he said « yeah, but Peruvian women are not very pretty! » She thought he was kidding at first but he repeated it several times so she would get it.

He didn't really care whether or not Peruvian women were cute and he was much smarter than making such simplistic statements. What there was to get was that he addressed his point of view about her to her. He indirectly told her "I don't find you cute inside". I was so thrilled. Because she had only talked to him, no hello for me. And because he made two points: first, he was not influenced by compliments, which is a good thing since men usually do like compliments. Second, he proved he could be bitchy which I also loved in men. He left the fountain; he had administrative things to take care of that day.

Back to my solitary lunch, suddenly, four friends strolling around came and sat there, not far from me. I felt like they had agreed to "let's settle here and have a smoke". Then, cigarette can federate, give a common goal we all friends are into reaching, a common need, we'll meet together.

"It is so useless! Plus, it costs a lot, including my health" many smokers have at least once stated when trying to quit smoking. Of course, they all have tried but eventually given up to their sin, stronger than them. So, when they claim they tried, what did they try? Did they try

to be healthy or to work out their content instead of their shapes? Was trying hard too hard?

Let's face the truth, cigarettes are not only a stress-releaser; plenty of things come up with it. Smoking brings in presence for unknown people to look at, sociability to meet new people, and needs to share with friends. By the way, it perfectly illustrates the idea of therapy that I had: it's destined to the shy and low-self-esteemed ones. The exercise is simple; it consists in standing up in a crowded place with nothing else but themselves. No headset, no cell phone, no cigarette, no purpose but to bear the eyes and the judgments of total strangers.

In function of the people you talk to or you intend to talk to, cigarettes and all the accessories take on other meanings. So, what's the big deal? Why it is so hard to choose between being a socialite and sick, and, alone and healthy? Let's think outside the box and consider cigarettes simply tools. What if lighters were meant to light up relationships? And what if cigarettes were a relationship remote control?

Relationships are one of the rare things worth living for. Even if some find them worth dying for, relationships remain the most complicated things on Earth.

Many have tried to rule them: government laws, religious principles, community controls... As for me, the first question of all about relationships turns out to be: what is my place in my family?

The Family Guy

The last weekend of March '07, I attended my brother's 40th birthday celebration. For the occasion, I had to go back on Brittany lane and it also resulted in me going back on memory lane. As a kid, I had spent way too many vacations there between rain, countryside and boredom.

And feeling like it or not, I had to catch up with a past I thought passed, but all of a sudden it was running back to me and becoming present again. There I was on the parking lot, bracing myself and displaying another self. As soon as I pushed the door to the reception room, I knew I had just given the people there access to my door.

At some points in the evening, I had the impression I had tuned in on a movie of which I had missed a part. I

hadn't seen the guys there for a long while, and although they belonged to my direct family, I had nothing to say to them. Moreover, I didn't hang out with them often enough to share my daily stuff and they appeared in my life frequently enough to know the main happenings. On my way to decide how I would act, I assessed the situation. Is family the bunch of people IDs attest so, or those that destiny makes you cross paths with? You know, they say that you don't get to choose your family, but I got to be chosen.

When you get passed the anger and the angst of your birth parents leaving you on your birth day, you may understand how Life works. Indeed, Life is a big decision-making process. And I understood that people get the right to choose and they do enjoy the use of it. My biological parents got to choose to leave me; my foster parents got to choose to adopt me; so, as my turn had come, I got to choose whom I would call family or not.

My life had just begun, I was done with my studies, I had a job I was paid for, and I had colleagues… I guess the guests to my brother's party were part of a past I didn't want interactions with any more.

They reminded me of a time when people considered me just a nice handicapped boy, playing around, fooling around, but not the brainy type; I could eventually use this opportunity to show (them) off.

I just didn't feel like pretending to catch up with people I didn't feel related to, even though they were relatives. Then, I decided to resort to social cutting-down and not talk to people I judged I didn't care for. Among

them stood the girly cousins who were my sister's age and all about giggling and long conversations about children and everything. I wasn't really interested in their lives and they were not into mine either. In that group of cousins stood Anne-Marie. During the five minutes I had lowered my guard, she managed to lure me, at the buffet; I felt wrapped like in a spider web. She asked me how I was, to which I replied with an automatic message: « Yeah! I'm great! » but didn't ask for her. Then, because she couldn't let me go that easily, she added this: « you know, I've noticed we talk at a higher level than you are —damn, she's smart, isn't she?— feel free to pull on our jackets to acknowledge us of your presence! » Now she could go back and eat faithfully again.

My brother had also invited this fellow, a divorcee who formerly worked as a salesman for Coca Cola, and had just started a new job as a local handy man who occasionally helped out in my parents' house. As I found myself trapped on the song-launching laptop, an Apple, he got nearer and nearer, felinely moving over to me. I had tried to avoid him a few times and postpone as much as possible the moment I'd have to face him and chitchat about casual things. He got close and started to be this guy. The guy that every one of us, computer literates, has once met: the guy who asks for advice to get IT-equipped. He then had me go through the very same routine which happens when I face people I seldom see. It was kind of the same routine used for job interviews, a very structured discourse; the difference was that there was no bargain at the end. No "let's have a coffee sometimes", no "I'm definitely calling you next week", no… nothing.

When it comes to relatives, would we rather keep track of those family tree suggests or keep off track those we never hear from?

The next morning, being ensnared into talking to another one of my girly cousins, I got to thinking about my reactions. Was it me? Was I just fed up with exposing my life with an automatic speech? Or was there more? Something behind that, something like disappointment? Was I actually sorry not to have a relationship but bits of it, with them? Both of us understanding that it was not going to happen, we commonly and without a word agreed to go on with our lives. She told me she needed something to eat and I said I had to seek my nephew. That was it. Apparently, she was smarter than I assumed.

After all the suffering I had recovered from, I meditated about what had gotten me so far: I reckon that it takes a big man to stand up to big misery, but it takes a big family to grow up into that big man.

In the car heading back to the civilized world, aka Ile-de-France, my mind was still bothered with this question. How to constitute ourselves a family? By studying surrounding pals' eligibility? Or by offering a deserved place in our hearts to those who remain by our side, no matter what, till Death do us part?

Unfortunately, the civilized world sometimes has its predicaments. General crises can be caused by serious matters such as demonstrations of violence, but also by much less important subjects such as soccer.

Soccer's Suckers

Pure happiness can make humans accomplish huge achievements, reach the highest mounts and hope for the best. I would never question what they can do. When I realized that soccer could be the source of pure happiness, though, I did question the reasons they would do so, and I got to thinking. Despite some arguments I had with my brothers, about how the soccer world cup's sudden exaltation had some effects that weren't so bad after all, it didn't fool me into thinking that serious society matters would be solved. Living supporters' craziness, hearing the noise caused by their hands on the horns and listening to the little phrases they kept yelling, cheering on and on, freaked me out, even more than during the previous game. I felt hurt. It was like joining a party after everyone is already drunk and you're in a different place where the

vibe is not the same. I didn't understand how they could be so into it, so eager to free the pressure the game had put on their shoulders? Why didn't they wake up?

France was a great country; we were lucky to benefit from so many advantages and rights offered here. But still, a lot of problems had to be solved. So many elderly people were left alone down the street, so many beggars were dying around the corner, so many youngsters needed guidance next door. Wasn't it too much, not to say indecent, to celebrate with such an energy the world cup victories, every time, when so many real problems required that energy to be tackled? I didn't blame soccer; I didn't accuse supporters of crime for loving it. I only reproached people for turning a blind eye on the real problems and deploying their real strength because the French team was passing once again. If you got a closer look at the situation, that was all there was. If you tried to have a chat about what was occurring, it wouldn't take more than a quarter of an hour. If you interviewed any of the supporters in the street, and asked them why they were so happy, what answers would you get? That the French team was going to the final, okay. That people were happy, okay. But that's all, folks. Nothing special, nothing more to say. That was why, by the way, they kept on repeating a limited number of short sentences.

Some people, though, tried to analyze and bring up positive points from the general euphoria. They pointed out that the French people seemed to reunite together, that everyone was finally opening up to each other and that they considered France their country. I was not that optimistic. Let's assume they were aware of the fact that each team

stood for its country, represented its culture. What if they were faking open-mindedness in order to find someone to share their euphoria with? What if the world cup was just a pretext to justify their sudden and strong letting go?

In a nation where I scented such an individualism, face to concrete society matters, how come French people opened up to one another so fast? In case it was just a pretext to burst out in cheering and happiness-sharing, what was about to happen once things had slowed down? Were we to go back to the same old, same old? Or did all of this open the door to the French unity we were desperately yearning for?

A few days later, the big game was on: World Cup 3, the last stand. As I watched the soccer final, I felt joy. I hoped they'd lose. I spent the game time checking the actions and the comments on the Internet to be up to date about the possible outcome. I started to taste that little excitement all the supporters had thrown to my face until then. But mine was pure evil. I had seen everyone happy, not to say exalted, for the past victories; I wanted to experience the other outcome, i.e. the losing part.

I don't know how, but my wishes were granted and France lost against Italy. Of course, all Frenchy as they were, fans were into arguing talks. They couldn't admit their team was good, really good, but didn't have the guts to save the day. When I saw the results on the net, I instantly felt some satisfaction. I knew I could see the other side of the story. I thought of sending a text to Antoine to claim victory, but on second thought it would have been in bad taste. He was a very close friend and we often had debates about soccer. Despite his usual good judgment, I wasn't

on his side when it came to soccer. He was the one to pass the after the loss call.

Hanging up, I felt bad. He explained to me why he liked soccer and why he would have been so glad if France had won. He unconsciously questioned my attitude towards general happiness that I thought tried to intoxicate me. Was I so bitter about Life that I was against people's cheering and partying for something that simple? Or was I fighting against it because it was, as for me, only sudden exaltation? What if it was just a cause for people to be happy? Did I deeply want all spectators to go home eyes down on the road, decorating their speechless faces with sad looks?

I regretted some of my sinful cheering when I heard the results. I wished I could take it back. However, I meant all the talking from my mouth for them to hear, all the writing from my hand for them to read. Then, I went back to thinking about Antoine's case. How come he could have relived some fabulous moments he had spent with his grandfather, provided France had won? How come a soccer victory can be a synonym of those moments? He said to me on the phone that his grandfather would have been so glad. What if I stopped and considered soccer just for what it was? Just a family moment. But I didn't contrive to be on his side completely. Something was nettling me because he talked about the victory, not about the time they would have had together.

I have to admit, I remember how passionate I could get when I was younger. Among the TV shows I was really keen on, there was Melrose Place. On the second rerun, I started to record the whole series on video tape. I

was definitely into it. I read spoilers, news and trivia, and watched religiously. One day, I pushed it even further. My parents were revamping the living room and thus all the TV equipment was out of use. Unfortunately, the rerun didn't wait for the living room refurbishment to be over and I had to think up the craftiest idea. I crawled and I skateboarded the VCR to the other room of the apartment where there also was a TV antenna. And the cherry: I blindly set up the VCR to be ready for mass time. The only thing I couldn't do was to cut off the commercials like I did with the other 220+ episodes.

No matter how intoxicated I was, I wouldn't fly to the moon for any of the actors. As far as I'm concerned, as long as people are not more or less closely involved in the results, I can't blame myself for appearing too judgmental. I can only resort to thinking that, unless awful sickness or dire injuries are implied, being driven crazy by some people we don't even know and reached by happiness is berserk; we have to fetch it all by ourselves. And that leads me to the real big Q: how much are we committed to provoke the birth of our own enjoyment of Life savoring?

I guess we were all fans with some passion for something; something we might even find stupid months later. I tried to think through my judgmental self. One difference still remained between their passion and mine. Like them, I loved to be a witness of my worshippees' talents. Like them, I enjoyed every bit of what they provided us with. But unlike them, I wouldn't forget that I was a stranger in my worshippees' lives.

Even though I didn't have the same adulation process, it reassured me about being human: my legs might not have been working but my heart was full-time rocking.

The Prodigal Son

San Francisco was sunny on my last day. I couldn't help but have the impression of living the last supper. A part of me knew that that friendly goodnight kiss to Jeffrey meant goodbye, thanks to minute waves I had intercepted. At the same time, another part of me still wanted a proper goodbye, with this word actually and bilaterally said. I had told him that I was leaving on September 5th, and that I'd enjoy spending my last day with him. I tried to call Jeffrey a bunch of times; I understood that he was denying me thrice before the cockpit would crow my name twice.

I was feeling like my trip wasn't complete nor whole, and yet, it was the right time to go home. So as to ensure I took my last fix, I rolled hours on The Embarcadero beside San Francisco Bay. I didn't have much time; I captured landscapes in fast-motion. I was afraid something might

die away from me, so I tried to do it all over again within one day. I was on a sort of treasure hunt against the clock, except I had found my treasure and I couldn't bring it back with me. Then, I caught it all with my grey-blue-green eyes. I breathed the air as if I were dead man wheeling. But I wasn't, I was going home.

I was having déjà vu flashes and I got it: the discovery section of my trip was over. The question and answer section of my trip was over as well. Calmness that I had been dreading was all that was left. My last day, my last hours had no objective other than acting as a smooth transition.

For my actual last supper, I slowed down my race and stopped at Palomino, a chic restaurant on the very Embarcadero. I was taken care of by a nice waitress who almost made me forget how sad eating by myself for my farewell dinner was. Facing away by the bay-oriented window, I was also facing back up to my ten days off. After a long fast-forward day, I was passing a short picture-by-picture evening. I reviewed what had happened, what hadn't and what should have. This trip had also been the occasion to make myself a promise. I pledged never to hold back again in case I wanted something to happen.

The fashionable ambiance and the luscious food carried out their mission: I spent a swell and sweet night. Lastly, I left the upbeat city restaurant. Along the Embarcadero and on Market Street, the featherweight wind was winsomely conducting me to Union Square, downtown. Back in my bedroom, I packed my luggage. And once I had finished, it hammerly dawned on me: my time with San Francisco was up. I surely had not answered

all of my questions completely. However, my questions were not yes/no questions; then the answers implied nuances and I had partly solved some of my mysteries. I had travelled half the world and wheeled in San Francisco with a few belongings and a lot of bothering questions. I was leaving the USA with a lot of belongings and a few remaining questions.

I had especially and finally understood a crucial notion: I wasn't just changing, I was evolving. Along my endless wondering about me, my questions were not the same ones that used to nag at me. Questions would always be there and answers would come and go, but I wouldn't mind any longer.

A few years later, I would be expecting different things from Life. I'd be more confident and I'd know how to deal with being lost in questions. Though, would I be living on my own? Would I be involved in a relationship? Would I find the courage to apply for and start a new job? And how many times would I be able to keep going through those steps again and again? That's yet another story.

Among all the ones I had learned in the American Dream dimension, I guess that if I could only keep one, I would pick that one moral: in Life, when you take some time to think about and address existential crises, you do get mentally richer. Paris was waiting for me, but I was in a different place. There was so much work ahead but things had shifted: I knew what to do.

For ten days, I had questioned my self and my experiences. I had weighed and figured out the very best and the very worst in each of them. All those new

experiences I had gained during my stay made me file my old ones into a history folder and made me eager, and more importantly ready, to live some more.

My heart had somehow opened up a little and the particles of bitterness had ceased their effects on me. As it rarely happened, my heart got what it expected.

I had fallen in love with San Francisco, but it couldn't last. Love at first sight wasn't intense enough to thwart the ephemeral illusion; I didn't really belong there. San Francisco was my summer romance and the summer was coming to an end. I had had other romances before and I had always gone back to Paris. I hadn't succeeded in gathering the strength to give a real chance to those romances. Maybe I wasn't supposed to. Maybe I wasn't finished with Paris yet. We didn't have the perfect relationship, while San Francisco was offering me it all: sunny weather, exemplary accessibility, and great lovers. But maybe what I needed was to give Paris some time. I had lived there for twenty-two years and it wasn't so bad after all.

Even though my leaving had a curious taste of forever, I had had such a tremendous journey that San Francisco would certainly make at least a second appearance.

I would come back to San Francisco eventually, but not in the same conditions. I'd come back not to leave some troubled states of mind, but to live some happy states of heart.

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I loved California for what it stood for: open-mindedness, melting-pot and of course the American Dream. Everything was possible there. And I mean *everything*. You can land from a fourteen-hour flight and make friends, you can go out in the middle of the night and find someone to talk to, you can have no plans and still live the most exciting and wonderful party of your life, little time later.

On the calendars of the American students, there is one period that is common to all of them, whatever majors they chose; that period is spring break. During spring break, all they think about is sex, alcohol and fun. They go thousands of miles away to forget their problems. It crossed my mind that that San Francisco vacation was my spring break. Okay in September, with hardly any making out, without alcohol, but fun was there. I think that the principle stayed the same; it was my spin break.

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